touchstone

spring 2011

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

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Editor's Note

Kim Peek

Inspiration is a controversial thing in the writing world. Some believe it to be a divine force that leads the writer's pen over the paper—or fingers over the computer keys, if you will— ultimately producing that perfect sentence, that flawless paragraph, or even that best-selling novel. Others believe inspiration is merely a romanticized part of the writing process, something that is not relevant or even necessary if one commits to working on his or her writing every day. I believe writing daily keeps your mind nimble and spurs creativity, but as a writer who often experiences the agonizing frustration of writer's block, I find myself also believing in and constantly searching for inspiration. On the days when I struggle to commit words to paper, when it seems I might never again produce a single worthy thought, I find myself turning to other forms of art to stir up some inspiration. Whether it be a section from one of my most cherished books, an Oscar-winning performance by one of my favorite actors, a breathtaking piece of art, or that one album that still manages to touch me after its five hundredth listening, surrounding myself with these artists' passion and creativity energizes me. Soon I'm back to my writing with a new sense of purpose and more fervor than I had before.

As Editor-in-Chief of this year's issue of **touchstone**, I've been privileged to find inspiration all around me, first in the stories, poems, and essays that fill the pages of this issue. At a time of severe tuition spikes and university budget cuts, government bailouts and widespread layoffs, and with more students simultaneously taking classes and working to pay for their education than ever before, it is exciting, encouraging—and yes, inspiring—that people are still making time to write, even when such work promises no financial compensation. Accordingly, many of the stories, poems, and essays featured in this issue tell tales of hardship, whether it be battling addiction, struggling to discover one's identity, coping with lost relationships, or merely searching to find a place in this ever-changing world. These are the struggles of everyday life, the very substance of literature. The perseverance presented through these fiction, nonfiction, and poetry pieces teaches us how to deal with the inevitable hardships of our own lives. These pieces, as well as the writers' obvious love for their craft, have inspired me throughout my time with **touchstone**.

I also continue to find inspiration in the dedicated individuals who have worked hard to make this issue of **touchstone** successful. The truth is this process has been nearly effortless, or at least has seemed so, thanks to the excellent work of **touchstone**'s advisors, editors, and staff. My eternal thanks go to **touchstone**'s faculty advisor, Kim Smith, for his sage advice and willingness to answer my endless list of questions and to Elizabeth Dodd and Katy Karlin for their constant support. I must also thank the dedicated graduate and undergraduate students who served as my genre editors, assistant editors, design and submissions staff, and copy editors. My staff not only spent extra hours outside of their strenuous workloads to read submissions, copy-edit, and lay out the magazine, but selected art for this year's issue, created original promotional flyers for the magazine, and volunteered their precious time to raise additional funds for the magazine. Their hard work and tireless energy made this experience irreplaceable for me. I also wish to thank Billy Collins for taking time out of his busy schedule to talk with **touchstone** about his craft. His dedication to his work is truly inspiring to all writers. Special thanks go to Chelsea Brimer, **touchstone**'s previous Editor-in-Chief, for her patience and endless supply of knowledge, and to Patrice Farrell for the generous donation of her fabulous art skills. Finally, thank you to K-State Printing Services, the K-State Fine Arts Council, and the K-State English Department for making **touchstone** possible.

Mirror
Emily Glass

Inflatable Guitar

Megan Haney

Hot pink bubble
Shaped as a guitar.
Electric lines course over the neck
Connecting the head to the misshapen body.
Light as a sheet of paper,
Enabling high, head-banging jumps
And easy propelment of legs.

No chords to stroke, or picks to hold
Just impressive skills of performance.
Air, surrounded by flamingo-colored plastic,
Makes an instrument of imaginatory expertise.

Look Back in Anger

Genna Calkins

Take your neglected memories
and box them up.
For the most fleeting of our moments
are the ones we fear
will fleet the most.
Everything slips away through your fingers
when you think you've got
a tight grip on the past.
I'm sprouting loneliness
as my words and pictures
turn to steam.
Because I can't make it stop.
I'm clinging to the void,
filling it with my artifacts.
Clutching it close to my chest,
just to keep it warm.
I've been practicing not blinking
in my free time in the hopes
of capturing wisps of time.
I'm on a quest for my Great Perhaps,
but what if it already
snuck right by.
My pockets are dragging in the dirt,
but it's all too important to let go.
I know what the world is capable of,
and I don't want

to be left alone with it.
I don't know what comes next,
if anything at all,
but if I can't recall what's gone by
then how can I anticipate
what I haven't yet seen.
There are pockets of empty space
bursting in front of my vision
that are blocking out my senses.
I don't believe in the inevitable
because I'm the only one
that parts the seas.
I'm taking what's unforgettable
and tying it in knots
to shove down my throat.
If I choke on the past
maybe it won't run away
quite so quickly.
I'm holding on as firmly
as the world will let me,
but to have lost
is everyone's fate.

The Shrimper
Mike Pemberton

Camaronero

Manolo Caverra squinted as he took a drag from a Marlboro, the vertical ruts in his brown, weathered face running sharp and jagged before fading into the clean-shaven edge of his jaw. Standing aloft in the wheelhouse of his shrimp boat, named "La Victoria" after his mother and sipping a steaming cup of black coffee, Manolo surveyed the Port Maribel harbor. Below him, the elderly parish priest, Father Tucker, approached, white vestments gleaming in the sizzling South Texas sun, hunched back bent over the bow of a small, idling yacht. Manolo, older than Father Tucker by a half-dozen years, winced at the sight of the frail figure on the bobbing ship. A wobbly Father Tucker clung to the guard rail with one wrinkled, alabaster hand and tossed holy water from a silver baton with the other like a drunken fisherman casting a line.

Mother Mary, Manolo prayed*,* half-disgusted, half-sympathetic, *don't let the old man fall overboard.*

Manolo understood why the Church no longer assigned young priests to Port Maribel. Most local kids either left town at the first chance or did not attend Mass. There was no need to waste a man in the prime of life in a dying parish. So Our Lady of Port Maribel Catholic Church became the end of the line for a series of dried-out, hearing-impaired, soon-to-be-dead priests, who like the town itself were resigned to their fate and paid their penance without complaint. Manolo understood. It was a slap in the face. A puncture to his pride, but his generation would not challenge the Church about such things. That was not how they were raised. And the Church knew it.

As the weary priest floated abreast of his trawler, Manolo clambered down on deck, removed his hat and genuflected, flinching as the cool holy water sprayed from the baton splashed on his thick thatch of white hair and dripped onto his face.

It was the day before the start of the Texas Gulf Coast shrimp season. Tradition called for a blessing of the fleet, boat by boat. Years ago this took hours. Now, with the fleet at a third its all-time high, even the slow-moving Father Tucker would be done in an hour. But Manolo and the other shrimpers clung to custom. Besides, he would take whatever help he could get to make the voyage profitable.

"Gracias, Padre," Manolo shouted.

Father Tucker released his grip on the rail, switched the holy water

to his left hand, and made the sign of the cross with his right, almost collapsing from the effort.

Jesus, Manolo thought as he climbed back up to the helm*, how'd it come to this?*

Manolo watched as the doddering priest drifted past boats with "For Sale" signs taped to windows or hung from the bows. Other trawlers, rocking gently in the wake, sat empty, having been seized from the bankrupt owners by federal marshals. Piers, once used for shrimping, lay abandoned, decaying from lack of use and maintenance. Father Tucker, as blind as he was deaf, blessed vacant boats along with the occupied, dumb to the difference.

The captains and crews of the working shrimp boats paused and prayed as the priest passed, then returned to readying their ships for sea, scurrying supplies on board, checking nets, fueling boats. The hustle and bustle of men preparing for the season had not changed over the years, there were just not as many. Like the rotting docks, wood withered, steel corroded; the men and boats were fading, a few less than last year, a few less than the year before.

Manolo rubbed out the cigarette in a clay ashtray twisted into the shape of a shrimp, a grade-school art project given to him years ago by one of his daughters. Through the last gray haze of smoke, Manolo watched as Father Tucker turned down an adjacent channel, consecrating and teetering on the edge, the crooked figure slipping from sight. Above the ashtray, taped to the window, was a faded photo of his wife Marta taken fifty years ago, a black-haired beauty of a girl dressed in her Sunday best white cotton dress and black patent leather pumps, her figure slim and sexy. She had blessed him with six daughters. All of them long since gone from Port Maribel. All college-educated, living in big cities. They told him to quit. They would take care of him and Marta. He did not have to work. Even Marta told him not to bother with another year. The bank was waiting for the boat, anyway. What was the point?

But to Manolo, that was the point. What the hell did he have to lose? Let them take it. Until then, he was still a man. Still the captain. Not some old fool waiting to die. Screw the bank. It was shrimp season. He was a Texas-by-God-Gulf-Coast shrimper. A camaronero. It was what he did. His choice. Not the bank's, not Marta's, not the girls'. They thought

Manolo a stubborn old man. As if he worked to spite them. They were wrong. Manolo decided years ago he would quit when he lost hope. But so far, no matter how bad the day, the month, the year, Manolo held out hope that shrimping, his way of life, would get better.

"*Chingao*," he muttered. "Screw it."

Manolo touched two fingers to his lips and pressed them gently against Marta's photo, then stepped out of the wheelhouse and dumped his coffee into the harbor.

"Freddy, you ready?" he said to his lone crewman.

Freddy, sleeping off a binge, was perched in a rickety straight-back chair propped against the wheelhouse wall, his head down, long legs extended, the heels of his scuffed, tan cowboy boots resting on the ship's rail.

"Shit, Manny," he said in a sleepy voice, not raising his head, the bill of his black and gold Caterpillar cap pulled down over his eyes. "Let me sleep. You can't trawl 'til after midnight."

"C'mon, *vato*," Manolo said. "You know it takes a few hours to get out. We got our blessing. *Andale*."

Freddy dropped his feet from the rail. His boots and the front legs of the chair banged the metal deck as he stood and stretched his lean, sunburnt arms over his head.

"Fuckin' blessing," Freddy grumbled as he hocked a goober through the gap of his two missing front teeth. "You Mexican Catholics. You're worse than my Irish mother. The blessing? It going to get you another buck a pound? Gonna drop the price of fuel? Fuck the Church and its blessing. Fucking blessing and 50 cents'll buy you a cup of coffee, Manny. That's all it's worth. Less, if you ask me. Cost me a nap."

"The Pelicano and tequila cost you. We got work to do," Manolo said.

In the old days, Manolo would have had at least a three-man crew. As captain, he navigated the boat through the Gulf of Mexico. As rigger, Freddy cleaned and repaired the nets. The third, and maybe a fourth spot, was for headers. Usually wetbacks or inexperienced crew, the headers sat for hours in the blistering sun on small wooden stools at the rear workdeck removing the head from each of thousands of shrimp netted, then packed them in the boat's freezer. In order to save money, Manolo and Freddy would head the shrimp themselves. It was mind-numbing, messy, grueling work, especially for two old men, but if they wanted to make any money, it had to be done. Neither man complained.

When they reached the fishing grounds, they started trawling, repeating the same intricate, unspoken choreography. Silently, they cranked

the pulleys and winches. The enormous nets, suspended above the water on either side of the trawler, expanded like giant green spider webs before being dropped and dragged for several hours across the muck and mire of the ocean floor. Without checking their watches or uttering a word, like a married couple who long since lost the need to speak in order to communicate, the men retrieved the nets from the sea, steel cable straining, maneuvering the bulging nets over the work deck. With a jerk, Freddy released the catch, a torrent of shrimp and flopping fish smacking the boards in a slushy splatter.

After clearing away the unwanted fish and flotsam, Freddy and Manolo sat on their stumpy stools, hat brims pulled down, leathery backs and shoulders rounded, letting the boat drift, heading the shrimp and gutting the fish. They alternated from chattering like two teenage boys, the bullshit piling higher with each story, to hours of silence punctuated by a joke or insult, each day the same as the last. By the end of the first week they had filled half their freezers with thousands of pounds of shrimp.

They could not believe their good luck.

No longer did the monotony of the endless work wear the invigorated men down. The fresh bounty stirred memories of a time when shrimp were plentiful and men were free to fish where they chose, catch as much as they could carry to port, and return home to their families with folding money in their pockets. Maybe this would be the year. Superstitious seamen, Manolo and Freddy did not speak of it, fearing a jinx, but their rebirth was revealed with the sparkle in their eyes every time they released the net and heard another satisfying splat.

"Jesus H. Christ," Freddy muttered one day deep into their second week after he released a load. "Sonuvabitch."

The familiar slap of fresh fish and shrimp splashing the deck had been broken by a heavy thud.

"Santa Maria," Manolo said.

The bloated body of a man lay before them. Face up, a blue and white striped nylon rope like the kind used to mark lanes in a swimming pool ringing his thick neck, he stared back at them with the same dead eyes as the fish surrounding him. His arms and legs were bound by more rope and a cinder block hung from tattooed wrists. The man's left leg was ripped away at the knee, flaps of jagged skin and a white bone jutting out from faded blue jeans.

Freddy stumbled back, wet rubber boots squeaking with each step, until his legs bumped against the side of the boat. He slid down the wall, taking a seat on the soaked deck, his blue eyes never straying from the

corpse. Manolo stood frozen, surprised but unfazed, a Korean War combat vet unmoved by the ugly, twisted rigidity of death.

"I know this man," Manolo said, staring at the puffy, pockmarked face.

Freddy sat silent.

"Freddy, don't he look like someone we know? Look at him."

"Jesus fuckin' Christ, Manny," said Freddy, finding his voice, the shock beginning to ebb. "I ain't been looking at nothin' else."

Manolo stepped forward, slipping and sliding, kicking shrimp and fish out of his way.

"Help me roll him over; maybe he's got some ID on him."

Freddy forced himself to a standing position and lurched to the body.

"Jesus, he stinks," Freddy said.

"*Respecta el muerto, vato*," Manolo said.

"Fuck it. Let's do it."

Manolo patted the man's front jean pockets. Empty. Freddy grabbed the man's good leg and shoulders and rolled him over, then gagged. Manolo felt a lump in the right pocket and pulled out a wallet.
Both men jumped away from the fetid carcass. Freddy tripped to the rail and puked over the side.

Manolo flipped open the soggy wallet, sea water and silt slopping onto his hands. From the inside fold he yanked a laminated "Hail Mary" prayer card. Behind it was a faded black-and-white picture of a father and son standing in front of a church. Manolo knew the setting well. A first communion photo taken on the steps of the Port Maribel Catholic Church. Manolo dropped the wallet on the deck and walked over to Freddy, panting and pale, and handed him the photo.

"Motherfucker," Freddy said. "A local?"

Manolo nodded.

He had recognized the features beneath the death mask, seen a resemblance. The face of a compadre, a shrimper, dead for years, Carlos Garcia. But this was not Carlos. It was his oldest boy. Carlos, Jr. Little Cacho.

Freddy cleared the deck of shrimp and fish, dumping them over the side. Manolo secured the nets and together they wrapped the body in a blue plastic tarp and dragged it to the bow of the boat where they could see it from the wheelhouse. They left the rope and concrete block attached, figuring the police would want to see Cacho as they found him.

Manolo climbed up to the helm and turned the shrimp boat toward

Port Maribel. The slick blue tarp rippled in the breeze. He fired up a Marlboro, stared at the photo of Marta from long ago, took a deep, slow drag and let the smoke slip from his lips in a slate cloud, the murky memory of better days floating by in his mind's eye.

Back to when it seemed everyone and everything was young. He remembered Little Cacho, a fresh-faced cocoa-colored boy, running along the docks with Manolo's daughters, waving as the fleet went out on opening day.

Running. Always running.

Yes, Manolo thought, Cacho had been fast. An athlete, a star football player, who grew up to be a shrimper like his father. Manolo loved his wife and daughters, but he always carried a tinge of envy for Carlos and other men for their sons. Some, like Carlos, sensing Manolo's sadness, made a point of including him when the fathers and sons sat together and shot the shit at the end of the day. Sometimes, Carlos sent Cacho to help Manolo on his boat. Cacho was respectful. Always worked hard. Never accepted Manolo's offer to pay. A good boy whom any man would have been proud to call son.

But then "the change" occurred. Not only to Cacho, but to everything. The sweet days ended, and nobody noticed until they were gone. It started slowly, Manolo thought, but in only a generation or two, the shrimper's way of life and many of the traditions and unspoken rules which governed the people along the border vanished.

At first it was the oldest among them "retiring." If retirement meant repairing nets in the back yard to fill in the gap between what a man needed to live and what Social Security provided. Others had "opportunities" elsewhere, like working in the processing plants for minimum wage and "vacationing" during layoffs. Yet most boats were still sold. Young men—not as many, but enough—stepped forward.

But fuel prices spiked. The government tightened access to fishing grounds. The press made a hero out of the "Turtle Lady" who, with her high-minded, clean-finger-nailed supporters in landlocked Austin and D.C., forced through a law which required shrimpers to put holes in their nets so sea turtles would not be trapped. To hell with the number of shrimp lost.

The wrinkled old bitch, Manolo thought*, cared more for turtles than men.*

Then there were the goddamn know-what's-best-for-everyone-even-if-it-means-destroying-a-man-and-a-way-of-life-college-educated-idiot-enviromentalists. The shrimpers sneered at these so-called lovers of the sea. They knew so much, these National-fucking-Geographic environ-

mentalists, yet the only way they could make a living from the sea was to stop others from doing so.

"*Puta madre*," Manolo and his compadres cursed loudly one day, smiles on their faces, drinking beer on their hand-built, sun-drenched docks as some scientists passed on their multimillion dollar, government-funded "research" ship.

The environmentalists on deck beamed and waved, like tourists at a zoo waving at the chimpanzees, until someone on board who spoke Spanish explained the insult.

"Fuck your mother, too," the well-educated researchers said under their breath, silly grins flipping to frowns.

"*Chingao*," the shrimpers hollered, spotting the change. Bitter laughter floated off the docks like a receding wave. "What you expect, a blow job?"

The environmentalists turned their backs, retreating to air-conditioned cabins and bottled water, their silently held, politically incorrect expectations confirmed.

The shrimpers grabbed their crotches and spat at the ship.

Manolo shook his head at the bitter memories, as if motion might dislodge them, might change the past and what he knew in his bones was the future.

None of them got it, Manolo thought.

Not the Turtle Lady and her well-meaning wealthy supporters. Not the press or the environmentalists or the self-serving politicians. Not the government bureaucrats, "here to help," standing by as Thailand and Brazil flooded the market with farm-raised shrimp, driving down the price of the Gulf Coast catch.

But Manolo and his *compadres* knew.

The sea fed generations of families. Paid their bills, gave them independence and pride. Served as salvation from a life of factory work or worse, welfare. To these men, the sea was no object to be observed like a laboratory experiment or admired like some kind of painting in a museum or regulated like a utility. The sea was a living, breathing part of these men. Like their religion, their soul.

It had been poached, piece by piece, by outsiders, by people who knew more, knew better. Who did not care about tradition or family or pride or individual men. Only bumper sticker causes and "saving the planet."

"Should worry about saving their souls," Manolo told Marta, "leave the world to God. Like it's goin' somewhere. *Pincha*

environmentalists, *federales*, politicians—they all need real jobs. Let us do ours."

And as these all-knowing strangers whittled away the shrimpers' ability to make a living, they also wiped out a way of life, destroyed their sense of self, stole their manhood.

It was that fucking simple.

Manolo knew.

And he believed the do-gooders and politicians knew. They rationalized it by wrapping themselves in the secular robes of the "greater good" and avoiding contact with the people their actions impacted. He watched them on TV as they slipped away from conferences and legislative sessions, skirting reporters and protesters, and slid into shiny cars, SUVs, or limousines, many paid for by tax dollars taken from men like Manolo. They communicated by e-mail, cell phone, and texts, not face-to-face, eye-to-eye, man-to-man as in Manolo's world. They zoomed home to air-conditioned, high-rise city condos or the sprinkler-fed, fertilized green of the suburbs – minimum wage Mexican maids and gardeners providing the elbow grease and sweat to keep it all nice and neat. They were like aliens from another planet to Manolo, these people who decried the building of freeways and demolition of neighborhoods but did not think twice about destroying men like him.

"Shiiiit, they won't even have a fuckin' fundraising concert for us," the shrimpers joked. "Like they done for the farmers. They should. Make 'em feel better 'bout what they done. Like payin' a whore a little extra after screwin' her for too long…shiiiit."

Manolo stared at the plastic sheet serving as Cacho's shroud.

Cacho and the other boys, seeing the signs, changed too. Most found other ways to make a living or moved away. Cacho saw his father grow old and broke, with nothing to show for his hard work and religious faith. Saw his mother, Alma, dying from cancer, the family unable to pay for treatment that might save her.

Cacho drifted. Stopped showing up at the docks. Began hanging with pachucos, gang bangers, in Brownsville, bringing home wads of cash for his mother, driving her to the doctors himself. He desecrated his bronzed, athletic body with gang tattoos. When Alma died, he drowned himself in booze and cocaine.

He got mean, Manolo heard. And he got rich from smuggling drugs.

Smuggling was nothing new in the Rio Grande Valley. Along the barren border, a place without pity, a man did what he had to do to feed his

family. Shortcuts, the skirting of laws which kept a man from making do, were not condemned. Like the revolt of Pancho Villa, such actions were revered in some quarters. Manolo remembered his own father talking of friends, good men, who bought "sotol," cactus moonshine from bootleggers in Mexico, and smuggled it across the Rio Grande to sell in the States. In Southwest Texas, entire families worked to harvest then smuggle the product of the candelilla plant, a wax used for chewing gum and makeup, through the canyons and over the mountains in the dead of night.

To these people, the border was a meaningless contradiction. A line drawn in the sand, illegal to cross but crossed with impunity and without repercussions by everyone. The laws concerning candelilla were just as ass-backward. It was not illegal to smuggle the wax into the States, but it was illegal to smuggle it out of Mexico.

"*Chingao*," Manolo's father would say. "Who gives a shit. Who they hurtin'? They got to eat."

Even so, there were limits, unspoken lines which, unlike the border, no one dared cross. Belief in the wrath of God and the condemnation of the Catholic Church kept many from going too far.

But all that changed with the drugs, Manolo thought.

For one thing, the money was bigger. It made men do things they would not do for liquor or wax. For another, it destroyed the people who used it and sold it, along with their families and the community. Some wrote ballads about the *narcotraficantes*, praising their defiance of the two-faced governments on either side of the Rio Grande, but nobody gloried in the destruction they left in their wake. Too many had been battered by it. People in Port Maribel knew about Cacho. They walked silently past Carlos after Sunday Mass, still on his knees, wispy gray hair wafting under the hot breeze flowing down from the white ceiling fans, praying for the repose of his wife and the soul of his son. Some stood outside on the church steps, whispering about Cacho, blaming his actions for the cancer which struck Alma, then Carlos. The boy was a curse upon his own family. But Manolo and the shrimpers never talked of Cacho, never asked Carlos about the boy. They knew why Cacho did what he did. They did not like it, did not agree with him. But who were they to judge Carlos for the sins of his son?

Children live their lives – Asi es la vida.

Manolo remembered when Cacho was sentenced to Huntsville. Remembered when Carlos died. One day the bank repossessed his boat. The next, his neighbors found Carlos in bed. Natural gas from the stove permeated the small, wood-framed house. Carlos, callused hands clutching silver rosary beads given to him by Alma on their wedding day, lay alone.

They told the priests he died in his sleep, afraid Mass would not be said if the Church thought it suicide.

Cancer, they said.

More or less, Manolo thought. ¿*Que es la differencia*?

The sight of Cacho brought it all back in a rush. In the few hours since he pulled Cacho from the sea and turned the boat towards port, Manolo changed his course. A lifetime passed. His lifetime. His wife and daughters were right. The signs had been everywhere. He simply refused to read them. He was an old fool. The final piece of proof lay before him, secured under a bird shit-splattered tarp.

"*No mas, no mas*," he whispered, making the sign of the cross toward Cacho.

"Manny, settle down," Freddy said, patting his *compadre* on the back.

Manolo had not heard Freddy enter the wheelhouse, had not realized he spoke out loud. Tears welled in Manolo's darkened eyes and rolled down the uneven grooves of his burnt face as he squinted into the setting sun. He did not bother to wipe them away. As the diesel engine chugged a deep, relentless rhythm in the bowels of the boat, Cacho's shroud flapped an uneven staccato beat in the sea breeze.

Manolo stood like a sentinel, one last duty to be performed in the soon-to-be-repossessed boat. Still a *camaronero*. Still the captain. Until he stepped off at Port Maribel and into Marta's arms.

"*No mas*," he said to Freddy, to Cacho, to nobody, to everybody, to God, to the devil. "*No mas*."

Contemporary Still Life
Chris Graber

Sonnet

Laura L. Close

No crows are jingoists. They have large bodies
but fly only as far as they may go.
No sacred rite binds them, but there's no
remedy for a wrung neck and no haughty
zeitgeist like postmodernism to take
stock of the fallen ecosystem, declaring
itself ill. As though these creatures, daring,
would send themselves to war. Time is a rake
and will not prove its love, patriotic crows
not sparing. His attention grows weak, and
I walk another three miles; take in the weekend;
wait for better things; see crows in snow,
two doves in the fluff of winter, ecru and ebon;
and take in cyberspace, echt as unbleached linen.

I Was a Dancer

Jamison Lee

Dressed in a red cap, fake denim overalls, and a thick mask
with comic book freckles, like Mario, I worked at the Gamestop,
danced on the sidewalk, decided I was gonna take pride in that job.

Everyone, even old folks made fun, the fat face of Nintendo's wop.
I scoffed at the guy down the street, who did the same thing for the pizza
shop. He was only going through the motions, and his costume didn't even
look Italian.

I waltzed under sun-swelter, alone, long enough for coworkers to worry
I was crazy. And, on occasion, I was a little woozy, two-stepping Super
Mario's tune, scatting what melody I knew, the beginning:

Doo

Doo-Doo Doo Doo

Doo

Doo.

Waggling in that hot head-sponge, I jumped and punched my fist through
imaginary brick. I was accused of causing an accident. There were no
fatalities, just a couple dents. Witnesses were pretty sure the driver overre-
acted. He slugged me in my squishy face,

through a suede mustache. I hardly felt a thing, but I fell, just to be safe,
roly poly curling. Then a sharp shoe drove a blow from my stomach. Im-
pulse grabbed the raucous ankle.

I recall the sound of the crowd and the siren, and how, every now and then,
when Nintendo won, my little brother would bite the controller.

Zapatos de Hule

Minnie Vasquez

a pledge made in heat after summer toil, forged in flame and weightless animal skin where nights ignite and smoke over rivers of glass. remove yourself from catalogue gloss. torch the mixture of damp skin against fraudulent nubuck. deliver the brown scraps from tethered rubber. obliterate echoes of shame raw on brown toes—scuffed soles have no place this side of the Rio Grande. send them back to man furnaces beyond Tamaulipas past the maquiladora lines sprinkled like black ants across foam scum on water edge, far from the playground where Sandy Ramirez combs sweet corn on her head, a sequined Indian princess with fair skin—dream shoe, you are not the one from Mexico.

I fly ovals in rattlesnake skin, dizzied by greens fed on shallow water sheds, a slither of gold and borderland sweat round south Texas wind the color of cracks and forgotten mud. before the shadow-myth captivates. before nike dusts my name—the wraith. before stadium lights scoff at disheveled hair from Neuvo Progreso. my ears exposed to the plop, plop, plop, plop, plop, plop, plop of *chanclas* inside a ten-year-old head, the sound of cheap vinyl never quite as new or good or intoxicating. never the scent of mainstream affordability and Payless.

I offer my shoes to the wind. I watch rain warp bedroom walls and chafe blue-silk victories. I listen to the obsidian butterfly grieve—no match for the divine charioteer. I offer my shoes to the wind. They burn and no longer win, blistering, shaming a glory built on *zapatos de hule*, defeated to mow lawns, to *trabajar*, to whatever, to pump arms far from maroon obliques under feet.

And Man Created God in His Own Image

After the painting by Ivan Albright

Scott M. Bade

Eating lunch with the wind and mountain
bluebirds, thinking about decay,
Ivan Albright
and the footprints

of beasts I'll never see. In the shadows like lapels
of the day's tuxedo
is a picture I can't make any more. But

who's to blame for sticking seeds,
lifting words, and getting dirty?
Remember fossils,
the imprint, following a thread, the drawstring,
standing in the shallows
  of the local pool and looking
at feet on the bottom,
like nothing ever seen before—
still, I'm grounded in water. And something else is
down there, a meaningfulness,
plastic images, the dreams
of Raskolnikov, of the Vermonter, and the matter of complete
indifference
  unaffected
by the cold deep. It's pale and blurry
because underwater
eyes are burning. And

I'm only good
because I'm saving my sins.
After the Albright exhibit
left The Art Institute of Chicago,
the wind took the leaves
from the city;
I rode the EL north to Rogers Park,
room without enough room

because small compositions,
because charcoal dust,
a face fading,
tulips limp,
another self-portrait.

the fringe of hair growing on this arch or ridge

Tara Mae Schultz

I am dating one, who, I know now,
shaves his unibrow with one of those
black trimmers women use to shave their pubes.

On our first date, I wear gray.
It doesn't matter what he wears.
I stare at his eyebrows over my cup of tea.
I wonder whether or not I can imagine
our children ever having those brows,
if I could let them go through
adolescence, pre-teen,
with two, thick caterpillars
facing off on their foreheads.
Would I want to bring this upon my future children,
on at least one of the 400k unmatured ova
waiting in my ovaries to be fertilized?
Is he the one for the job? Should he be?

I wonder how he'll kiss me.
Brows first,
or will he lead
with his chin?

Should I accept a second or third
with him (if he asks),
or should I seek elsewhere?

How long should I wait before
delicately suggesting he get them waxed?
After the exchange of I love yous? I dos?
Post-Coital?
(Yes, get him while his penis is still sputtering,
the blood still making its slow stroll back to his skull.
Compliment, encourage,
I like how you look, but you could look even better,
with just one small $10 + tip change.)
After I'm comfortable enough to let him see
the scar on my right thigh and my cellulite in
fluorescent lighting?

He walks me to my car.
Men do not walk me to my car.
At my car, I suddenly notice
the eyes beneath those brows,
blue and green, searching and soft,
eyes for the bedroom,
eyes for the missionary or doggie position,
eyes for reverse cowgirl (oh, definitely).
Eyes for sex that has nothing to do with
caterpillars.

The Earth Dies Screaming

Genna Calkins

The smell of bananas
makes me violently ill.
You're so obvious
in how you whisper.
I would move the world,
but you won't let me stand up.
When I was born they asked,
'What the fuck you doin' here.'
But I'm going to keep dreaming
until the world is silent again.
My love is an inanimate object,
and I find myself winking at plants
in the dwindling hours of night.
I gave so much,
and yet you wanted so little.
My life in paradox,
accepting the embrace
as that of a stranger.
One doesn't understand
why life is curved the way it is.
Broken silverware
made into jewelry
just to see our skin break out.

The accidental percussion
follows my moods
as they wind between the furniture.
Don't base your opinions
on that stack of literature
towering around my sense of self.
I may be a series
of complicated dance steps,
but my dreams are spread
out on the road.
Gasoline mixed with rain.
One match and it all disappears.
There's a kind of hunger
gnawing at my existence
from the edge of my personality.
An escape in the form
of purchased cereal
and maintained air pressure.
Bite yourself
because I'm never coming back.

Seventeen Reasons to Set My Furniture on Fire

Jessica Lakritz

Lice, bedbugs, semen.
New Age therapy for pyrophobia.
The furnace died after the first snow. A feisty
and sudden rejection of Materialism. Demons
don't listen to logic, only fire.
I've lived in this flat, dull stretch
of corn and cows too long. Yes, the Midwest
is too long. I hate you,
and there is nothing else to do,
no other heavy oak erotic coffee table with sturdy legs.
I would like to light that table on fire.

A violent desire for a new life
gutted through me after driving all night
throwing small possessions from the window
like my blue curtains that smeared the bedroom
and everything in it blue,
and all the spices on my spice rack, especially
the cumin, and the maps that I keep on my walls—
bus maps and walking tours
from Austin, Amsterdam, Madrid, San Francisco, etc.
I lost my keys. I found my baby mud turtle floating
belly-up in his tank. I had a dream that the couch
was alive and we spent a night together with tequila—
me, calm and sifting through the cushions for spare change,
mostly pennies not for worth,
only satisfaction. And the couch took one
too many pulls on the bottle, lit itself on fire.

The power went out.
The water was boiling.
We had nothing left to say.
I'd already tried everything else.
I ran a bath, hot, and sat next to it
in a towel under a sputtering light bulb, watched
the water grow cold. I stayed awake
all night on a wooden foot bridge,
waiting for splinters. I cooked
all of your favorite meals,
threw them directly in the trash one
by one. I followed a stranger all day
secretly. She was snipping flowers
from yards around the city. I cut
your birthday from the calendar.
The missing square is more interesting.
I'd already tried everything else
like growing rosemary in the window sill
and stacking all the books against the door.

Belmont Plantation

Taylor Harris

"We must critically question a population that has a fetish for staring at bleach-white columns, wide porches, and magnolia trees that are uncoupled from their origins and very purpose—as the headquarters for those who governed and gave their consent to a vicious cycle of human capital..."
-Matthew Hughey, Ph.D. Candidate, Sociology

My Toyota rumbles up the skinny paved lane. A white picket fence keeps pace with my car, a reminder that I'm nearing the hallowed heart of this gated golf community called Belmont Country Club. I moved to Belmont, located in Ashburn, Virginia, with my husband nine months ago. Before we bought our home, the salespeople told us about the spacious town homes, convenient golf memberships, and free hardwood floors we'd receive if we bought "now" in this burgeoning suburb of Washington, D.C. But they never mentioned the onsite plantation, a landmark listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Instead, they sent us to the clubhouse restaurant attached to the plantation mansion for a free dinner.

Close to a year later, this drive, though only a mile long from the foot of my driveway to the Belmont plantation, is lonely. Weeping willows crouch by the pond to my left before the land gives way to the manufactured green of golf course, where two sweater and khaki-clad men measure their success against a yellow flag. The grade of the hill increases, and my right foot digs into the pedal just before I slow down and pull over at the crest of the hill.

The Belmont Plantation looms ahead, a resurrected vestige of the Old South. A five-part Federal style mansion built in 1799 with burnt-orange brick and American sin. Standing on the highest point in eastern Loudoun County, the plantation, like the eyes in eerie paintings of Christ, follows me in every direction. Unlike those paintings, it demands of my soul, "How does it feel to be a problem?" This, as W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, is the unasked question between me and the other world. And like Du Bois, *I seldom answer a word.*

Leaving my car, I step into the gravel-lined drive designed for horse-drawn carriages. I follow this semicircle, outlined by an empty brick moat, toward the bleached portico and enjoy the friction of my Converses against the small stones. The sound reminds me that I exist, am part of history, and cannot be erased. A mirror cast before my thoughts, it reminds me

that I haven't stepped inside the house because I can't manage to swallow its outside. I am still choking on the six Doric columns, red-roofed smokehouse, and vintage palladium windows.

Certainly I am not alone in my psychological repulsion. Monica, another African-American Belmont resident, has confided that she won't even buy plantation shutters. "Everything about plantations is derogatory," she says. "It's all about servitude and abuse."

Yet Monica and I are supposed to accept that when Toll Brothers purchased the land in 1995 to build Belmont Country Club, it renovated the original plantation—to look like the original plantation! We are supposed to "get" why this so-called manor house is now a site for antebellum-inspired weddings and dinner banquets.

Matthew Hughey, my former professor at the University of Virginia, doesn't get it. "It's strange that we have a reverence for plantations," he says. "They almost take on the form and power of being hallowed sites. As long as we treat them as holy objects and relics that are disconnected from oppression, I fear they will continue to function in the lines of their original purpose."

Nearing the porch, I almost expect Ludwell Lee, the original owner of the plantation, to greet me at the door—as one of his forty-four slaves. Through the windows, I see the gleams from small furniture lamps resting on coffee tables and chandeliers hanging in the hallways. It's as though his family still lives here. I imagine them gathered behind Ludwell in the front hallway awaiting guests from Belmont's sister plantation, Coton. Guiding the guests on the mile-and-a-half journey are slaves holding torches in the night, as they did on the night of August 9, 1825 for one of Lee's grand balls.

The porch sounds hollow and pangs as I step up. Lights partially buried in mulch point toward the base of the house, ready to illuminate its façade come nightfall. With my back to the house, I take in the landscape: the Blue Ridge Mountains peeking through the forest, creating a backdrop for folds of land dotted by the wooden props of equestrianism. I can't help but pretend that I own this. That I own this peace of mind, this freeing sense of agency. That this ton of brick behind me is not a scar on my back. A lone hawk circles and glides, circles and glides above me before brushing against the leaves of a blooming tree to find an empty branch. The air here is quiet and without song. Though tapping at my conscience, I hear the tune

of reason sung by Du Bois: *So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia?*

I step from the porch, letting my right sole smack onto the red brick path below. I sense the thumps, thwacks, shuffles, and stomps of those newly emancipated slaves who returned to their plantations in 1865, declaring, as Michael Vlach has recorded in *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery,* "This is our home. We have made these lands what they are." Only to find out the land they had worked still did not belong to them. Vlach has specifically captured the words of Freedman Bayley Wyat of Yorktown, Virginia, who gave a speech proclaiming his people's rights: "We has a right to the land where we are located. For why? I tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locates upon; that the reason we have a divine right to the land."

I cannot find leisure on this plantation—not at a dinner party, nor a picnic, nor a picturesque wedding. For why? I tell you. I still wade in Bayley Wyat's tears and stand in the dust of those who kicked up Georgia's red clay but were made to leave without a deed.

Brave Like Soldiers

Kara Oakleaf

Ian had the matchbox because he invented the game and because he's the oldest. He took out a match, a toothpick with a red top like a stop sign. Holding the match close to his face and squinting, he scratched it along the side of the little box once, twice, and then a shock of fire lit up his face on the third try. He lit the candle and then shook the match until it went out, like he was shaking water off his hands. Andrew and I watched the flame and breathed quietly through our open mouths.

Two floors above us, our mother napped, but two flights of stairs felt like a long distance to travel, and I might as well have been alone with my brothers. Ian never played Vietnam games while our mother could catch him, especially now that the war was over, and so we shut ourselves in the basement to play. It was dark down there, with no lights except for the candle and a bit of daylight from the dusty glass of the little windows just beneath the ceiling. One old couch draped with a moth-eaten sheet sat in the corner, but the rest of the room was bare. The basement air smelled like wet earth, like the ground outside had somehow snuck indoors. I sat on an old throw pillow with fringe around the sides so I wouldn't have to sit on the concrete floor.

"The rule is, you can't cry. If you cry, or scream or anything, you lose, and whoever gets the farthest without crying is the winner," Ian said. He sat across from me and Andrew, instructing us, but he looked at me as he spoke.

I met his eyes and nodded. I did not want to lose. I had begged him to let me play; for years, Ian left me out of his games. I was too young, he said, and war games were really only for boys. He only began letting me play on my last birthday, saying he supposed nine was old enough, but by that time, the real war had ended.

Next to me, Andrew shifted and crossed his thin legs in front of him. He wore dime-store dog tags around his neck, identical to Ian's and mine; they clinked against each other as he moved. The candle threw our shadows behind us in long lines, making us look taller.

"This one is easy," Ian said. He kept his voice low and steady. "The commies use grenades and bombs buried in minefields to try and kill the good guys, and sometimes you don't get killed, but you get burned in the explosion."

I looked at the candle and the dim glow of light surrounding the flame. When I breathed in, I almost tasted burning wick on my tongue.

"If you're going to be in the war, you can't be scared of getting burned," Ian said. "So this is the first test: you have to run your finger through the flame."

I looked from Ian to the candle, the flame rising and dancing when his breath reached it. Ian stuck his index finger in his mouth and sucked on it for a minute. It shone with spit when he pulled it out, and then he lowered his hand and ran his finger through the center of the flame, briefly splitting the fire in two. Andrew and I flinched; Ian didn't. He held up his hand on the other side of the candle and displayed his finger, unharmed.

"See?" he said, smiling at us. "Easy. Can't even feel it if you use enough spit."

I glanced at Andrew; his lips were pressed together and his eyes, narrowed into thin slits, stared hard at the candle. Ian wiped his hand across the knee of his jeans.

Sometimes, our mother talked about Ian being so quiet and nervous when he was younger, but I couldn't remember that Ian. The Ian I knew was the one in front of me, a boy with uncombed hair and black lines painted under his eyes, wearing camouflage and touching fire with his bare hands. His games involved firing toy weapons into an invisible crowd of commies, and he always killed them all. Ian's games tested his bravery, and, when he let us play, ours. They gave him something to prove to himself.

After our father left for the war, Ian dragged his sleeping bag into the woods in our backyard and slept there alone, because he wanted to see what it was like. Once, a group of kids wearing black arm bands threw a brick through our front window, the one with the Army decal, and Ian picked up the chunks of broken glass and threw them out the window, aiming at the kids as they ran away, the glass slicing up his fingertips. That was last year, although it felt like a much longer time had passed since then. Ian wanted to buy a new decal, but our mom said no because he hadn't written in so long, and to be honest, she didn't know if he wanted to come home after the war, and what was the point of decals, really? But she didn't say anything when Ian found a new decal and put it in his bedroom.

In the candlelight, I could still see those little divots from the broken window in Ian's skin as he held his hand close to the light and inspected the finger he'd just passed through a candle flame. I looked at my own fingers and wished we were outside running away from Ian's pretend commies instead of sitting in front of real fire, or that we could find a new game now that the war was over. But I didn't say anything; I couldn't challenge Ian when he was finally letting me play.

"Who's next?" Ian asked.

Andrew and I looked at each other, and then he looked at the candle, rubbed his palms together and sat up on his knees, ready. Ian nodded at him, and I bit down on my lower lip and chided myself for not wanting to go first. I pulled my legs close to my body and tucked my knees under my dress.

Andrew kept his finger in his mouth for a moment, and then moved his hand toward the candle, his index finger extended and the rest of his fingers tucked into his palm in a tight fist. He held his finger close to the flame; the knuckles bent and the outstretched finger shook a couple of times, and then in one breath, it was on the other side of the candle. Andrew looked down at his hand in surprise and then grinned at Ian.

"Good job," Ian said before turning to me.

Still perched on my throw pillow, I scooted forward carefully, closer to the candle. I put my finger in my mouth and held it there. My jaw felt tight, and I didn't move, afraid my teeth would start to chatter if I took my finger out of my mouth.

"Hurry up, we're not going to wait forever," Ian said. "If you can't do it in two minutes, you lose," he added. Ian liked to make up rules to our games after we'd started playing. Andrew and I never tried to stop him.

"It's okay; it doesn't hurt," Andrew said.

Ian leaned over and shoved him. I moved my hand toward the flame.

"Ten seconds," Ian said. "I'm counting."

I shut my eyes and sped my finger across the wick; for a fraction of a second, I felt the fire surrounding my finger in a ring of heat, and I opened my eyes. On the other side of the candle, the skin at the center of my finger looked pink and felt hot, but only a little bit. I didn't cry. I looked up at Ian and grinned.

He nodded at me.

"Good," Ian said. "We're all still in." He pushed himself up off the ground and motioned for us to follow him over to the stairwell where our small storage closet sat tucked under the steps.

"This is the next one," Ian said. "The commies like to take soldiers as prisoners of war. They lock them up in jail cells all alone and sometimes don't give them food or anything."

I shifted from my left foot to my right and back again.

"So this is the prisoner of war part," Ian said. "You have to stay by yourself in the closet for five minutes, with the lights out."

"That's it?" Andrew asked.

"That's it," Ian said, smiling. He knelt down to unlatch the door.

The closet hadn't been opened in months, and Ian tugged hard on the door handle a few times before it swung open, revealing the black hovel inside. Little clouds of dust sprang from the corners of the doorframe. Andrew sneezed.

I tilted my head to the side and peered around Ian into the closet, blinking and squinting until my eyes adjusted to the dark. Our sled and an old tricycle with red paint flaking off the bars sat along the back wall. Cardboard boxes sealed with thick masking tape filled the rest of the closet.

I tugged at the dog tags hanging from my neck; on one side, Ian had taped scraps of paper with our father's name written on them, so we could pretend they were his real ones. Somewhere in the closet were pictures of my parents that my mother had thrown into a box several months before, sealing the box and tossing it into the closet without labeling it. She started to do the same with his clothes, and then changed her mind and gave them all away to Goodwill. I wondered about the pictures though, because sometimes I couldn't remember exactly how he looked, even though I had dog tags with his name on them.

Ian dug into his pocket and pulled out a watch, too big to fit his wrist. "I'll go first," he said, handing the watch to Andrew before he climbed into the closet. He had to crouch down to fit through the little doorway, and his body was almost too wide to fit between the walls of boxes. He nodded at Andrew, who quickly jumped forward and closed the door.

"Lock it," came Ian's voice from inside.

Andrew looked at me and slid the lock into place.

"Okay, start the time," Ian said.

Andrew checked the watch, and he and I sat down on the floor and watched the closed door. Andrew placed the watch on the floor between us. Every so often, we heard Ian moving around in the closet – his body brushing up against the ground and the boxes as he waited for the time to pass.

"This one's stupid," Andrew whispered to me.

"Yeah, it's not even scary," I agreed, but when Ian emerged and asked who was going in next, I didn't move from my seat on the floor. Andrew stood up and ducked into the closet.

Ian didn't speak to me while we watched the second hand tick. After it made two circles around the face of the watch, Ian stood up.

"It's only been two minutes," I said.

"I know," he said. He walked slowly around the edges of the room, then stopped, knelt down, and scooped something from the floor into his hands. He cupped his hands together and held them out in front of his body as he walked back to the storage closet.

"What's that?" I asked.

Ian parted his hands slightly and let me peek inside. A spider crawled in circles on his palm, looking for somewhere to go.

"The jails in Vietnam are really old, and lots of bugs get in," he whispered.

"That's not fair; Andrew doesn't like spiders!"

Ian put a finger to his lips, shushing me, and shrugged.

"We didn't put any bugs in with you!" I whispered.

"You could have. I didn't tell you not to." Ian unlocked the door and opened it a crack.

Andrew's voice came from inside. "Was that five minutes?"

Ian shook his head. "Two and a half more minutes, and you have to wait with this." He set his hand on the floor inside the closet and opened his fingers. The spider scurried off his palm and onto the floor. I heard Andrew scoot away, and Ian shut him in again.

We didn't hear anything else until Andrew's time was almost up, and then we heard him knock into the boxes, and a second later, his shoes stomping over and over again on the floor, like he was running. Ian checked the watch and unlocked the door.

Andrew lifted his feet one at a time when he came out and then wiped the bottom of his shoe on Ian's. Smudged remains of the spider smeared across the toe of Ian's sneakers.

"You're a jerk," Andrew said to him. He turned and sat down.

Ian inspected the top of his shoe. "You didn't have to kill it," he said. "That was the only one I could find. What are we supposed to do for Carolyn's turn?" he asked, jabbing his thumb into the center of my chest. I stumbled backwards.

Andrew ignored him.

Ian sighed. "Okay, fine, you have it easy then," he said to me. He held the door back and pointed into the closet. "Get in."

I fit in the closet better than the boys, but the space became narrow as the stairs forming the ceiling descended, and I had to sit down between boxes. The one to my left was labeled "Christmas decorations," the one on my right, "baby clothes," printed in handwriting I didn't recognize as my mother's but couldn't place as my father's either.

"Ready?" Ian asked.

"Ready."

He shut the door, and everything was black. I blinked and waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark, to make out the shapes of the boxes, but the room was too sealed up, the door flush against its frame and letting no

light into the room. I heard the hard sound of metal against metal as Ian locked the door from the outside.

I hugged my knees to my chest in the dark and waited. Five minutes was not such a long time.

Then, I heard footsteps on the stairs; the wooden steps creaked loud and sharp in my ears. I sat up and felt my way to the door. I placed my palms on the wall in front of me, feeling for the crack of the doorframe and listening. I couldn't hear anything.

"Ian?" I said "Andrew?"

No one answered. I pushed against the door. It creaked and budged slightly at the bottom, sending a sliver of light onto the floor of the closet, but nothing else happened. Along the side of the door, where the lock was, the door held tight.

"Ian, you're cheating!" I called.

Still nothing, and I shrank back into my corner of the closet, jumping and gasping when I bumped my head on the handle of the tricycle. A moment later, I felt something soft brushing across my ankle, and I pictured Ian's spider, dragging a silk web over my legs, tying me to the floor. I scratched my legs hard, clawing into my skin at the tops of my feet, then all the way up and around my calves. I buried my face in between my knees and repeated to myself, five minutes, only five minutes. I kept my eyes closed; the dark you see inside closed eyelids isn't as frightening as seeing nothing when your eyes are open.

I gripped the dog tags in my hand and tried imagining myself as my father, pretending the name on my tag was my name, and that I was much older and braver; that was the way Ian played the game, and he never got scared. I couldn't quite imagine being my father, though; I'd been much younger when he left and didn't remember him as well as my brothers must have. His face showed up foggy in my mind: that wasn't quite how his nose looked, was it? And did he really have a beard? I could only remember his face as it looked in photographs, and then I didn't know if I was remembering him or just the pictures of him. I turned the dog tags over in my hands, twisting the chain in the dark.

I jumped again when I heard sound on the stairs above me, pounding feet rushing to the basement. The door flung open and the dim light from the basement flooded into my eyes, much brighter than it was before Ian shut me inside.

"Come out," Ian instructed. I unfolded myself and crawled out of the closet. He smiled at me, but in a way that made me afraid of him, like someone in the middle of playing a trick.

"Did we scare you?" he asked. Standing behind him, Andrew bowed his head and looked at me with quick little glances.

"No."

"Did you cry?"

"No!"

Ian knelt down and studied my face. I backed away from him, and he stood up after a moment.

"Okay," he said. "Your eyes don't look red or anything, so you're still in."

"Well, that wasn't very nice," I snapped.

Ian shook his head. "The commies aren't very nice either. They leave the prisoners alone all the time, like, for years. It's part of the war." I opened and closed my mouth and looked to Andrew for help. He didn't say anything.

"Who cares anyway; you're still in," Ian said. He crossed the room and sat down on the floor, looking up at us expectantly. Andrew and I followed after a moment and sat down across from him.

"Here's the next part," Ian said. "If you do get caught, the commies will torture you for information, but you're not allowed to tell them anything." He slid two fingers into his shirt pocket and pulled out a safety pin. "Here, you're going to give me your hand, and you spread your fingers out like this." Ian held up his left hand, and with his right, pinched the bit of skin between the thumb and the index finger. "I'll stick you with the pin, right here."

Andrew blinked, and then his eyes grew wider and wider until they formed perfect circles. I felt my breath get shallow.

"Don't worry, it's just like getting your ears pierced," Ian said to me. I felt my earlobes, finding the little holes in the center. Earrings were okay, but I didn't want Ian leaving holes in my hands.

"Who's first?" Ian asked.

"Why don't you go first?" Andrew asked, his voice hitting a high note.

"Because," Ian explained patiently, talking to us as if we were so much younger than him, "I can't do it to myself. I have to show you guys how to do it first, so one of you knows how to do it to me."

Andrew shook his head. "No way."

"Come on, don't be a baby." Ian grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me close to him. "Carolyn isn't scared, are you?"

I held my breath and shook my head quickly. I stared at the tip of the safety pin gripped in Ian's fingers. He set my throw pillow in between us

and placed my hand, palm up, in the middle. He pushed my fingers apart.

"You don't have to do it," Andrew said quietly.

Ian turned the pin in his hand and looked from me to Andrew, smiling at us. He inspected my hand and held the pin just above the spot between my finger and thumb.

"I'm not going to do it," Andrew said.

"Chicken," Ian said and touched the pin to the thin skin at the corner of my palm. "Okay, Carolyn, he's out. It's just down to you and me." He tightened his grip on the pin and began pressing.

"Just stop it," Andrew said, speaking louder now.

My breath caught in my chest and my body jolted as sharp pain shot through my hand. The pin pierced the skin, and a drop of blood appeared. I shut my eyes.

"You're such a baby. Look, the little girl would be better in the war than you are," Ian said in a low voice.

"You dumbass, who cares?" Andrew said. He was shouting now. "There isn't even a war anymore. It's over."

The pain in my hand grew stronger. The pin must have gone all the way through, but Ian kept pushing it in, and I breathed faster and blinked my eyes furiously to keep from crying. I wanted to pull away, but Ian still clutched my wrist, holding me in place.

"It is not over," Ian yelled back.

I tried to find my voice, to speak up and tell them my hand was still bleeding.

Andrew stared at Ian, his face softened, and looked surprised. "Yes it is; the war ended a long time ago, like months and months ago, and we lost."

Ian looked away from him and stared down at my hand, holding the pin in place. "Then…then… no." His voice sounded far away. "It's not over."

"No..." Andrew said. He scrunched up his face for a moment and then shook his head. "It is over."

I squeezed my eyes shut. Ian hadn't moved the pin. "Ian–" I choked, barely able to hear my own voice.

"The war isn't over," Ian snapped. "Everyone knows it's still going on; it's not over yet. They just can't tell us what's really going on; they're only saying its over."

"They are not," Andrew spat, his voice flat but hateful. "The war ended a long time ago, and you know it. You're just playing a stupid game to make Carolyn cry, so just stop it!"

"Ian, my hand," I said. A trickle of blood ran across my palm and dripped onto the pillow. It made me dizzy and I looked up at my brothers, away from the blood.

Across from me, Ian's eyes shone brightly, and a moment later, tears spilled down his cheeks. His war paint smeared and left black streaks running over his pale skin. He let go of my wrist, and I raised my hand to my face, the pin still stuck in my skin and little drops of blood forming around the wound. Andrew watched us quietly, and Ian didn't say anything.

I looked back at my hand; my fingers shook, and the pain still ran sharp across my skin. I looked back and forth from Andrew to Ian to my own hand. No one moved.

"I won," I said into the silence. The words sounded small and distant, and for a moment I wondered if it had been someone else's voice.

Andrew turned away from us and walked upstairs. Ian wiped at his cheeks uselessly and continued to cry without making a sound. I pulled the pin out of my palm, and it sent a wave of pain up my arm. I watched the blood harden on my hands through dry eyes.

Dew In Grass
Paula Glover

Church with Grandparents

Carrie Shipers

Grandmother's nylons sag around her ankles.
When my boys were all at home, she says, we filled
an entire pew. Grandfather tears a page from the hymnal.
I never liked this one, he says, too much God.

She spreads her Bible across her knees. Your father sang
in the choir three times a week. His voice changed
when he got married. Grandfather grinds a peppermint
between his teeth. You can lead a horse to Jesus,

but you can't make it talk. Grandmother underlines
the morning lesson. Folks don't read Leviticus
like they used to. He bows his head and whispers,
Jesus loves the little children. Grandmother unsnaps

her purse and pulls out a dollar stiff with starch.
Grandfather sobs, All the little children of the world.
He sprinkles pennies into the collection plate. Grandmother
sighs, When I was a girl, God didn't forgive so much.

Arguing from Sources: A Draft

Adam Million

Intro

Taylor Swift made me do it.

3 years ago I took my mother to a Taylor Swift concert. We bought hot dogs and T-shirts with her sassy face emblazoned upon them. The concert dates on the back. We were going to have her sign below the city. It was when she failed to step out of her bus that I realized Taylor Swift is an All-American princess, that she is the standard for aspiring young girls.

In the essays we covered n class, Barbara discussed divorce, talked about people not accepting broken families as real families and then I'll show how corporations r bad in schools and how parents dont want to pick up their children from daycare in the Levitt/Dubner essay.

Thesis

All-American princesses cause young impressionable girls to do things they would typically never do b/c they r forced upon the public through the media, in schools systems, and with little regard to divorce and family.

Body

As a child my fascination with Taylor Swift was virulent (check definition) and this fact b/c it caused me to want to become her so much that I started writing songs during class.

[Insert my YouTube vid of "Tear Drops on My Guitar"]

Writing song lyrics in school is obliviously a great way to begin a musical career. If you write songs during school like Taylor Swift, than you will get a boyfriend and become a princess because you r obliviously hard working.

Similarly, as I began to model my study habits upon hers, I also became a huge fan of hers while watching television.

Two more topic sentences about Taylor's family and the suspension of the kid for wearing a Pepsi shirt (Klein's essay).

Insert quote from Taylor's best friend (Wikipedia)

Insert quote from principal at Coke School (Klein, p. 60)

Conclusion All-American princesses are great American idols. They set a standard for beauty and talent like no one else. In my writing, happy families, a dedication to writing songs, and Coca-Cola are evident keys to success.

after a funeral
Jimbo Ivy

She asked, pained but proud…pawing,
If I would write a poem;
Across her shoulders.
between the blades
Down, down, down
All the way to the end of her.

Zips slipping
Snaps popping
Hooks begrudging
I asked:
Should I write it backwards, so you can see, after?
"What's after?" she said.

Felt tip on skin, not so thin as to skip between the ribs
but warm and soft and seething with loss,
quiet tears slipping unseen between strokes,
A natural object
seeking some ease through my inadequate symbols.

So-
Twelve precise, concise lines later
A mere ninety syllables
She twitched, sighing
"Read it to me."

Daddy died sixteen years late
hands hard from a life too long too ragged
to go gently into any of his nights.
His eyes finally closed;
thin and tinged with an endless well of bourbon,
cheap, neat fingers
leaving hot, purpled marks on everything,
everyone, he touched.
Daddy died sixteen years too late;
So why are my eyes still hot
And wet
And wide with missing him.

I didn't count the minutes it took for her to speak.
But when she did, she rolled over,
turning my page down to sulk in the sheets,
And naked, not nude, said,
"Write me another."

Crash Course

Amy Dyer

This drive reminds me of a painting
I once saw. No limits,
just coasting curves with rays
of what I call heaven
reaching across bare land at me.

Mom says she must hear the song
to match a beat the wind seeks
as it rocks our car.
The clouds forgot to come today,
allowing me a glimpse of the unknown.

I do not hear the music.
Instead, Mom tenses and time slows.

As I wake, I watch the flowers
on my dress drip red, and realize
that heaven didn't want me.

A Thursday in January

Heather Etelamaki

The vehicle sits haphazard in
the space illuminated by the eerie
purple glow of the neon bank sign.

Cars enter and exit the side street.
Headlights cut through the darkness burning
retinas and drawing lines across my vision.

Yellow panic lights like weary strobes
are the only indication of my goal.
What damage is hidden from my sight?

The frosted grass along the shoulder
threatens to tear at my ankles. She looks up
as I rap on the glass, face masked by shadow.

Ed

Megan Haney

Once upon a time there was a chair, a chair named Ed. It's a long story actually, but a good one.

Ed was an old, metal and plastic, folding lawn chair. If I recall correctly, he had a green and orange patterned seat. He was definitely a trouble maker.

Four friends and I found him on an island covered in hot sand, broken glass, and rocks. He was quite a savage. One could tell he'd been roughing it for a long time.

We got to talking a bit. His accent was a little hard to understand, but we really got along, especially he and my friend, Jessica. She decided to take him with us. She brought him into her family and treated him like a son.

So the five of us plus Ed set sail from JessAmMaLe Island in our paddle boat. The task of propelling us home was given to Leah and myself. Jess, Amy, and Ed were free to relax. Ed, for some reason, was not cooperating. He didn't have the right body type to be voyaging on our boat built for humans.

Finally, I got so fed up with the bickering and the fighting, I did the unthinkable. I attempted murder. I grabbed Ed by the arms and flung him into the open water.

Jessica screamed and immediately dove into the tread behind the boat. Once she was in the water and attached to Ed, we all realized she didn't have the capacity to save a life. Her head was bobbing in and out of the water, with arms whirling around like a water mill. Amy dove in next, to try to be a lifesaver. She was not much help. Finally, Leah was the rescuer.

She leaped in and took hold of Ed while Jessica and Amy helped each other.

Meanwhile, I kept paddling. Good riddance; I was rid of all of them. I got to watch them wallow in the deep brown water. I easily parked the boat since there was no extra weight. The others swam back, safe and sound. Ed was treated as a king and I was scorned.

I won their hearts back though. Eventually, they warmed back up to me. I explained that it was really just a big comedy skit; that it was funny. We laughed and always remained friends.

Author's note: This short story is dedicated to a good creature named Ed. Unfortunately, Ed is no longer with us in the mortal world. He has gone on to the place where good chairs go. He will always be remembered in our hearts and memories.

He was a strong chair, and perhaps if one less person had decided to sit on him, he would still be present in our lives.

Ed, this story is a tribute to you and all that you had gone through in your life. We love you, and we thank you for giving us some of the best memories of our lives.

Things Remembered and Not

Heather Etelamaki

i.
The class talked about that chapter
for days. It followed us, a
restless shadow of theme.
“Memory is fallible.”

ii.
Glen doesn’t recall punching my father.
Right in the gut. Stupid teenagers.
He did it again, years later
as my father told him of his toils in education.
“I guess it’s the choices we make,” he said.
I’ll wager he will forget that too.

iii.
Mom’s real laugh thrives
on the holidays. Three generations scraping
the dessert plates for traces
of Better-Than-Candy-Pie.
A fish wrapped in baggies and Jan falling off the moon.
It’s that certain glow in her eyes when she looks
around the table, a window.
Pull back the curtain to understand.

iv.
The wonder fades to misery instantaneously.
She begins to cry, staring at the drawing
I gave her, now hanging on the wall.
“And now he’s dead,” she says.
My father and I look at one another
because the drawing is not of Grandpapa.

v.
The faces are still there, frozen
in cinderblock and Sherwin Williams' finest.
The sun that beats down on them is not
present in this current reality.
I ask Heidi if the faces had had eyes all that time ago.
She does not hear me, meandering through the dark.
Turn back to the now mocking
faces. "Do you remember them?" I ask again,
only to my silent companions.

Gibby Williams, Live at The Hole. No Cover!

Jimbo Ivy

Gibby Williams had one good song in him most nights,
tossed out between his faded flannel and broke back guitar.
He sang into a vintage Shure 55 worth more than your car,
covered it with a dirty sock, making his voice
as rough and happenstance as all the sights he'd ever seen.
Gibby made fun of himself before the
bored, yellowed eyes at the bar
could get a chance,
Choosing suicide over murder, easily.
His tunes were all bluster and no bones; they lacked the "quintessential spirit
of the age" as one kid mewed over his fake Red Bull and shit vodka,
but Gibby sang them honestly; did not try to hide what he was
from the bored young girls in the audience.
Gibby's tracks didn't bounce or bop or grind, and so the girls didn't either.
They just stared over watered-down beer and limp Marlboro Menthol Lites
as empty and lonesome as rowboats waiting for an excuse to be moved.
He sang lonesome songs, songs called "Momma's Little Boy" or "Gotta Get Home"
Songs meant to evoke empathy but instead they annoyed,
clanking and howling along minor to major to seventh
so much the same that one ran headlong into another
no one ever suspected a thing.
Or cared.
Or even listened.

The Hole was most often a metal bar, was what Gibby
Called a "stag" bar,
stools draped heavily with dark hulks of lonely, hungry men 25-50.
The two girls at the bar looked passed around,
The two in the audience just looked scared.
Halfway through the show, Gibby shifted to blue-collar biopics,
Songs earnestly titled "Callum County Coal Revolt" or "Which Side Are You On?"
Briefly a history major for one of his past lives,
Gibby had fire for open-mouthed caterwauling about the church,
union bulls,

and “his daddy’s black lungs.”
Gibby grinned tar-stained teeth when he fucked up, as if it were some
private joke between him and the audience.
His merch suitcase was too thin to be serious
looked used to being opened and then
unceremoniously closed,
giggling girl holding a T-shirt up, showing it to a friend
then putting it back, roughly, smudged and wrinkled,
So much like Gibby himself.

Gibby Williams had one good song in him most nights,
And tonight, he saved it for last.
Dropping the country from his throat and slipping the sock
Off the mic, he started fingerpicking chords.
Shambling from C to A minor, he ran through arpeggios
So perfect, so nonexistent in the rest of his set that even
the haggard bartender looked up from his worries.
And it went like this, the fourth, the fifth
The minor fall, the major lift.
A sweet and clear voice keening up through the stained rafters
Lifting an ancient word up to an ancient hope.
All the grizzled mouths ceased their rude noise at the world,
All the wry smiles slipped down and clattered to the spit-stained floor.
Gibby didn’t smile, didn’t wink, didn’t sway or shuffle,
He just sang his Hallelujah out over the sea of roughs and harpies,
Until the final chord fell, resolved, and left nothing but
Gibby Williams, live, at the Hole
no cover.

Birth
Emily Glass

Somewhere Inside

Mary Stone

On the corroded black asphalt rested a blue storage tub. It sat there, as if it had always been there, right where the water from the mop bucket had ground a groove into the pavement. I had done this many mornings, opened the back door to the porn shop to dump the soot-smelling mop bucket, only to splash water on my non-slick black shoes and the bottoms of my black slacks. This morning, the sun, unusually warm for pre-fall, hummed on the back of the building. I stared at the tub in the sun for a moment, leaned in, and read the note taped to the top: "DONATION: Things I do not want in my life anymore." On lined paper, the words looked eerie in black ink, tidy and symmetrical, as if the man who wrote it had spent time.

I left the back door open and called my boss, Autumn. She yawned on the other side of the phone, her voice rasping as I stood over the tub.

"Someone left us a present by the back door," I said. I read her the note. Autumn laughed. "I'm afraid to open it," I said. "What if there's a dead cat?"

"People do that all the time," she said. "It's like they have to announce to the world they want to quit watching porn. So they bring it to us. I find bags out there all the time."

"How about a tub?" I said. Autumn laughed again, and said, "A tub, I would have heard about." She asked me what was in it. I kicked it a few times. It was heavy, like the tubs I have in storage filled with books and journals.

I had to open it. I kept Autumn on the phone and flipped the lid onto the asphalt. "Magazines and tapes." Autumn kept laughing, told me to throw it into the dumpster and to call her if I needed anything.

When I got off the phone, I squatted to look in the tub: stacks of magazines with wrinkled and faded edges, a few VHS tapes, sans cases. And then I saw the empty bottles – Stamina RX, MaxSize, Blue Steel. Empty male enhancement pill bottles. I pulled it to the dumpster, scraping it over rocks, and dropped a stranger's burden into the garbage with a steel thud.

It is some strange phenomenon in my family that the word "sex" is never used, and so I imagine anything sexual can only be talked about in some demeaning way. My father does not call Priscilla's by its name. He calls it "the slut shop," or "the lingerie shop." Only sluts, according to

my father, are associated with the porn shop. And yet, in my time working here, interacting with the customers, watching what these men buy over and over and over, I know that somewhere inside, even my father knows what we really sell.

Gordon comes in every Monday. He is our best customer and likes to tell me this. He parks his blue Chevy pickup on the side of the building and stays in the video room, usually for four hours. I stand at the counter, pricing DVDs and putting them into binders (we have to keep them in binders or they get stolen). Sometimes, it will be just Gordon and I in the store for an hour or more. One August we had a big sale on DVDs, four for ten bucks. After pricing them, I dragged the boxes to the video room to stack the cases on the table. Gordon stood there, holding his DVD stack. "New ones?" he said.

"You know it," I said. I grabbed what could fit in my hand and started rearranging the DVDs on the table to make them fit. Gordon stood near me, watching my hand. He looked at each cover of each case and watched where I put it. He smelled like diaper rash cream.

I came back with another box, and Gordon had two stacks of DVDs on the floor. He reached his hands out to me. He wobbled, trembled in front of me, his palms up to the ceiling. "Let me put those away for you," he said. For a moment, I wanted to throw the box at him. There was something desperate in his arms, unsettling, as if he felt the urge to ask before thinking about it, but it was like his body made him do it, and his arms held the shame. I said, "Whatever," and dropped the box to the floor. I pretended to straighten the bondage rack while watching him push the box into the corner, look at each DVD, and divide them into stacks. He read each case, front and back, the sparse words, the images. I wondered what he could possibly be looking for, what it was that he searched hundreds of cases for, and what these new DVDs had that the others didn't.

According to the Adult Video News (AVN), a trade magazine, Americans spend four billion dollars each year renting and purchasing porn. Some people claim there is no possible way that the porn industry brings in this kind of revenue because of the many free websites. But when Gordon comes in each week, he spends, on average, $107 per purchase. He pays cash and claims he won't be in the next week, after buying ten or twelve DVDs. I wonder what he does for a living. How can he afford it? Does

he have a wife to hide this spending from? If he stopped buying porn, what could he buy or do with all of that money to fill the holes in his life? Does he ever sit in the parking lot, working through the bills stacked on his kitchen counter and deciding which ones to put off just one more month so he can check out the newest releases of Adam and Eve productions?

Lockett wasn't allowed in the store for almost a whole year. He used to fight with the other cashiers, refuse to pay late fees for movies he rented. He liked me. One time he touched the side of my face and said, "You're so beautiful to me," his brown hand scraping against my cheek. I told him, "Don't ever touch me."

During sandal weather, the porn shop gets more prank calls than other seasons. I don't know if it is the warm weather that brings humor back into our skin, or if the same warm weather brings something else out of our skin. The Kama Sutra guy calls more during the summer, always asking what products we carry and if we can put massage oil back for him. He always asks me what products I have and what I like to use and what I would recommend. He is too excited, so I never tell him. Something in his voice feels wrong, like he struggles not to say something else. Every time he calls, we have the same conversation. He asks me questions. I tell him I call him the Kama Sutra guy and that I refuse to make him feel happy by answering his questions. He still calls, his voice sprained or lonely, but I do not give in to his desires.

Sandal weather also brings in people who do not come in the rest of the year. One night I got a call from a private number. The man on the other line said, "Do you have any foot fetish magazines?" I told him we have a section for legs, but not directly aimed at feet. It was a quarter till midnight, and I told him this as well, so that he would know he'd need to hurry.

A few minutes later, a round man in his late thirties walked in the door. I sat at the counter reading Sylvia Plath. He had a thin mustache and wore a collared shirt and khaki slacks. He looked normal enough. "I just called," he said. I hopped off the counter and told him to follow me. I led him to the back of the store where we keep shelves filled with magazine packs; old issues of popular titles lumped together in packs for a good deal.

I showed him the section titled "Legs."

"Do you have any movies with feet?" he said. "No shoes." I showed him the only two movies I knew of that had girls sticking their feet out, showing off each toe. I told him these were the only ones I knew of. We did not have a section dedicated to feet. He thanked me, and I started to walk back to the counter. "You have very pretty feet," he said.

I looked at him. He was looking at my feet, the black sandals exposing them. He could see my bunions, the pink paint chipping off my toenails; the tracks of dust, from vacuuming, lining the sides of my soles. "I don't think so," I said.

"Really, pretty," he said. We stood there a moment, I not knowing if I should thank him, and he looking at my feet. I went back to the counter, turned off the radio, and let him know it was time to go.

He picked out one pack of magazines and one of the movies I showed him. As I rang him up, he stood with his cash in his palm, shaking. I gave him his change and thanked him.

"If I gave you a hundred dollars," he said, "would you let me lick your feet?"

I laughed. Seriously? I thought. No way is this guy serious. But there he stood, looking nervous and small, and I felt glad my feet now hid behind the counter. "I don't think so," I said. It was the only thing I could think of.

"Had to ask," he said. "Got divorced a year ago. I just wish I had someone's feet to lick."

And he walked out the door. I followed, tingling in my arms and legs like a wave of light had just erupted into my body. Locking the doors, I watched him get into a car and open his magazines and flip through the pages of one. I closed the register and went home, wondering what kind of man is so lonely he has to pay to lick feet – wondering what it really meant for him, to even ask me such a thing in the first place. How must he have felt, standing there at the porn shop, hoping somewhere inside that the woman behind the counter would conquer his loneliness, even if it did start with feet and saliva.

In November 2004, experts testified before a Senate committee claiming that pornography is addictive. Millions of Americans, they said, are addicted to porn, and the effects of porn on the human brain are toxic. Toxic. Meaning porn can kill. There is evidence out there that suggests that the brain reacts the same to an orgasm as it does to heroin, but I have yet to

see someone overdose from exposure to sexual imagery. A key feature of addiction is how tolerant of the substance the "user" might become. These experts claim that porn addicts move from traditional non-violent porn to such things as sadomasochism and even sex with animals.

Where I work, the foot fetish guy only comes in to buy porn with feet at the focus, but these experts would have you believe he has moved on to feet from a more conservative fantasy. I know most of the regulars stick to their preferred fetish, and they are very specific. Micah always comes in right before closing and looks at the DVDs up until the time I tell him it is time to go. One time, he asked me for movies with only women, but he wanted the women to seem as though they just met. He only rents movies with titles like "Girlfriends."

Lockett rents interracial DVDs. He likes the ones with the word "Monster" in them. He tries to get me to read the titles to him, like a lot of our prank callers do. I just look at him and say, "You know how to read," though I wonder. He laughs. He likes to say, "You so good to look at," and watches me straighten cases in the video room. I say, "My fiancé sure thinks so," trying to unravel whatever is inside of him that he thinks gives him the power to talk to me like he does. I walk sideways when he is there, and as straight as a plank of wood, not allowing the natural sway of my hips into his sight. I used to waive his late fees, but lately I have decided that the best way I can get to him is through his money.

Gordon, our "best customer," told me he "collected these things." He looks like a stamp collector. He likes the production company Wicked because the women are always beautiful. One time I caught him staring at one of my cashier's backsides, a half-grin turning itself up on his face. I do not think she looked anything like the women in his movies, and yet she got the same look from him that I had seen before, when he grabbed the box from my hands, his arms seizing. Does he have them memorized? All the women's bodies he has seen? Somewhere inside they are categorized according to height or race or color. To me, they all just look the same.

Sex therapist Louanne Cole Weston, Ph.D. says that people watch porn for three reasons: to see their fantasies acted out, to avoid intimacy, and simply to aid in masturbation. There must be another reason people watch porn. What if they don't have one particular fantasy they want to see acted out? What if, somewhere inside, we have to watch porn to find

something out about ourselves and our own sexuality? According to writer David Amsden, "Porn is the wallpaper of our lives." We live in rooms with walls colored with sex and sexuality. It is the kind of wallpaper that remains through fires and broken relationships. Looking at one wall of my life; I see the fear, the unknowing, the curiosity. Exploring sex and its mysteries. Another wall plays for me intimate relationships, memories of past lovers, empty beds. Porn is even more than wallpaper, perhaps, more like the moving picture of discovery – discovering what we feel somewhere inside, our deepest secrets and our ravenous appetites.

For almost two years, I have worked at Priscilla's. The work and the customers and the things I have seen have wedged into my life, carved a little space in me that screens everything sexual, it turns it away in disgust and vows to throw it out for good. It is hardest remembering what I liked about the job when I first started. Maybe the discount. Maybe the paycheck. But I found myself pulled to the images on the backs of DVD cases, trying to analyze what I saw, trying to make sense of the people in the videos, and of the people buying them. I cannot find myself on these DVD cases or on the covers of magazines. If I sell it, I must be like them, at least according to my customers. I remember being told that men only want one thing, that you have to be like the girls in porn to find a man and keep him. But I don't have the fake nails, the long hair extensions, the red lips. I have never been able to wear a skirt without feeling self-conscious. These women are painted and busty and tan. They laugh at all of his jokes. Do they know how to remind him to follow his dreams? Do they promise to be there when his bank account is over-drawn?

The Kinsey Report only measured sexual encounters that lead to orgasm, implying that the ultimate goal of human interaction is to achieve orgasm. The pornography business figured out a way to make finding that release easier. I think the wallpaper looks tacky. I imagine someone like Gordon wanted to paint his bedroom a pearl color, but he could not find the right shade at Lowe's. Instead, someone in a smock gave him so many yards of clearance wall paper and offered to put it up for him. I still imagine that somewhere inside he continues looking for just the right shade of pearl, only each time he comes to see me, he forgets more and more of the gloss that gave it its color.

The day I found the plastic tub, I looked for the stranger in every

man that walked through the door. I looked for the ones shaking as they gave me money. I looked at the magazines they bought and the movies they rented. I waited for someone to buy some pills. Of course, I couldn't figure out who had left the blue tub, who it was that had decided to quit porn and let us know, the place that makes it available to him. But somehow I also know he came in that day. He probably looked at his feet as he walked through the door, ignoring my hello. He probably shuffled back to the magazine rack and searched quietly for another face he found familiar. He sits at home drinking soda, reading his magazine on a chair in the basement, alone. I know that somewhere inside, he is so lonely. And he will continue, like we do, to search for that one thing that, at least, momentarily gobbles the empty space.

fallout boy: Vietnam

Bethaney Wallace

I uncap a bottle of Jameson and pour another glass,
lime, no ice (how father drank it).

Screaming abrupts my ears,
chanting warnings over a supercelled sky.
I clasp my ears and flee to the shelter's door,
camouflaged under layers of dirt and debris.

I tuck into my cot and listen for the adventures of Agent Orange,
a radio show villain who mutates anything in his path.

I breathe idling scents of liquor and lime
and pinch my eyes shut,
bluffing sleep,
and waiting for it to become real.

A Wedding Announcement

Kate Harland

The light turned green, and she moved through the intersection. The windshield wipers snapped up and shoved the heavy snow off the windshield. The quick action jolted Anna out of her daze. Missy was humming in the back seat. A song about a bird she had learned in school the other day. The little girl gently tilted her head from side to side as she sang, but not to the rhythm of the music. Anna glanced into the rearview mirror and smiled. Her daughter had her musical talent—which was zero.

Anna eased on the brake and pulled the car up very close to the curb.

"Missy?"

"Yeah, Mom?"

"You'll do great today, I promise. Just be sure to listen to Regan, okay?"

"Okay, Mom, okay."

"Do you have your shoes in your bag?"

"Yeah, Mom. Geez. Okay, bye."

"Bye sweetheart. Remember, I love you."

Giggles. "Moooom." Even at seven, Missy thought she was too old for her mother. Anna took a deep breath and decided against jumping out to give her baby a big hug as the child sprung from the car like the cork from a wine bottle.

"Bye Mom!" And the door slammed. Just like that, Anna felt ready to cry. She hadn't thought about it at all this morning, just made herself focus on getting Missy ready for practice, and she had only read it once. She had cut it out and put it in her pocket. Anna pulled out the creased piece of newspaper. Three hours, she thought; she had three hours to herself before she had to come back for Missy. Greg was watching the game with his brother and wouldn't be home until after dinner. Anna could do anything she wanted this afternoon, go anywhere, and no one would question her. She should just go home and take a nap, or a bath. She could sit down and finally finish that book she had started three months ago, or she could watch a terrible movie on daytime TV. She could do anything but go there. She wanted to go, but she didn't want to. She wanted to remember, but she didn't want to be reminded. Anna Locke didn't know where she was driving just yet.

She looked down at her dress. It wasn't near fancy enough. She couldn't. No, she couldn't go in. But she could at least see the place. Just a

peek. He wouldn't even know she was there. She would just look at it from the outside, stranger that she was. Anna fingered the piece of paper she had clipped from the newspaper that morning. "Jeremy Chamberlin, son of Mitchell Chamberlin, and Kristen Wilson, daughter of James and Shelly Wilson… the wedding will be December 29, 2008 at Westview Church…" Anna's name was not mentioned. The paper did not say Jeremy Chamberlin had a mother. Anna supposed he didn't.

She glanced down at the two smiling faces. He had his father's eyes. Anna remembered gazing into those eyes and thinking there could be nothing better in the world. She really wanted a drink. Just something to keep her from bawling right here while she was driving fifty miles an hour.

No. No, she had given that up. She would not do to Missy what she had done to Jeremy. She looked at her son's gray eyes again. She tried to think; what color were his eyes really? Why could she not even remember the color of her son's eyes? She hoped they were a clear blue like his father's and not a murky green-brown like hers. Anna would not have believed that it was Jeremy if his name wasn't printed below his picture. He didn't look like he did the last time she saw him. That would have been when she tried to come to his high school graduation. No, she hadn't seen him even then; his father hadn't even let her in. He said Jeremy didn't want to see her, especially when she was like that. But she had needed to work up the courage to come. She had needed it.

That had been a bad time, Anna thought. She was past that bad time now. She wouldn't try to talk to Jeremy again. He had made it clear when she tried to call that he wanted nothing to do with her.

The last time she called, he answered after three rings. "Hello."

"Hi, Jeremy. It's Anna—it's your mother."

"Oh—Stop calling, Anna. I don't want to talk to you."

"But Jeremy—"

"No, I said no! Listen, okay? I do not want to talk to you. Stop calling."

"Jer—"

Click.

She tapped the steering wheel as she thought about it, fidgeted with her rearview mirror. Thinking about that now made her stomach turn like it did when she saw road kill or drove by a really brutal car accident. He wouldn't know she was there; she just needed to go. Even if she didn't see him. She just had to be there for a moment. Just for a second.

She looked at the girl sitting in her son's lap, staring out at her from a hazily printed photograph. The girl's eyes challenged Anna. They

said, “I am better than you. He loves me—more than he ever loved you. He doesn’t even want to see you.” The girl was pretty, blond; she smiled with her teeth showing. Anna never smiled like that: she looked funny with her teeth showing. This girl, she looked radiant when she smiled like that. She was very slender: Anna wondered if she was a dancer. She thought about her son in love with a dancer. Yes, a nice pretty ballerina. A ballerina would share Jeremy’s love for music. Mitch would love a ballerina too.

Mitch. Anna hadn’t thought about him in a long time. At least not how he used to be, back when they were Mitch and Anna. He let his hair grow long and threw on mismatched clothes and acted like he didn’t care about anything but his guitar. He did though. Mitch cared about looking cool, he cared about partying; he cared about pretty girls. Anna had been a pretty girl. She could still pass for pretty on a good day, she supposed, but the years and the booze had done some damage. She was young and completely infatuated then. She couldn’t keep time with a nursery rhyme, but god, she loved to hear Mitch sing. She would go to the parties where he was playing, and she would picture those quick fingers that brilliantly handled the guitar running through her hair, or down her back. She would imagine those quick fingers unbuttoning her shirt.

She and Mitch had been in love, Anna thought. Well, at least she had been in love. And when she looked at Jeremy in the gray picture, she could see Mitch. Without the hair gel and the button-down shirt, Jeremy was Mitch twenty years ago.

Anna took a sharp corner, and snow spilled off the roof of her car onto the road. She could see the church now. She hadn’t needed a drink this badly for seven years. She thought she had beaten this thing when Missy was born, but she wanted one now. She wouldn’t though. Drinking was the reason she couldn’t see her son’s wedding. Why she couldn’t see him at all. She wouldn’t touch it again. Missy would have a wonderful mother. Anna wondered if she could make up for past wrongs by doing right now.

She pulled into the bank parking lot across the street and parked facing the church. It looked so calm and peaceful; she couldn’t imagine that there was a wedding going on inside. On the outside, the church looked normal. Anna let herself envision the kind of decorations the pretty girl sitting in her son’s lap had chosen. Did she choose white roses or yellow daisies? Were the bridesmaids wearing lavender or turquoise? Did her son shake and fidget and take quick breaths when he saw his bride walk down the aisle, or did he stand calmly? Anna wondered what Missy’s wedding would be like. Anna would get to help plan that one. She would help send invitations, order food, and hire a string quartet. Jeremy’s wedding she did

not get to see. She didn't even get to send a toaster. He hadn't even wanted her to know about it. Her son hadn't wanted her to know about his wedding. Anna pushed her shoulders back and took a deep breath. It was her own doing after all.

When Anna found out she was pregnant, she freaked out. At first she couldn't even breathe. She didn't cry, but she didn't leave the bathroom for two hours. She shook when she told Mitch. She wanted to get rid of it, but Mitch wouldn't let her. He offered to marry her, but Anna refused. How could she marry this man? They had nothing in common but the baby growing inside of her. Mitch liked "good" music. Not the kind on the radio, but the kind people talk about in coffee shops: obscure bands that reference dead authors and other obscure bands. He liked drinking coffee and debating politics and world issues. Anna liked pop music. She liked listening to the radio in her car with the top down. She didn't like coffee: she liked beer, she liked vodka, she liked rum; she liked anything that made her feel good. She liked to talk about who people were dating and which celebrity was seen having dinner with his costar last night. Anna knew Mitch thought she wasn't as good as he was. She knew even then that he thought she was stupid. She could not marry him.

Anna didn't get her wedding until she was thirty-nine. Jeremy was twenty by then. That would have been just a couple of years after she had shown up at his graduation with a stomach full of gin and a beer in hand. She had thought about coming before she started drinking that day, but she needed something to get up her nerve. The more she drank, the more scared she got, and when she finally decided to go, she had to stumble into the gym.

"You choose to show up now? Now? Anna, he doesn't want you here. This isn't about you anymore."

"Please. Mitch, I just want to see my son. Tell him— I want—To tell him that—Mitch. Please."

"Tell him what, Anna? Tell him that his mother can't even stay sober until one o'clock in the afternoon? I think you had better leave before he sees you." He grabbed her arm and started leading her to the door.

"Mitch, please. Mitch, will you just—will you—" she sank sideways into him, letting his weight support her. He looked down at her, and she thought she saw a little pity in his eyes.

"Will I what?"

"Tell him I love him. Tell Jeremy I love him."

"I will." Mitch took a deep breath, and it hissed out through his nose. "I know you love him. Just don't come back, Anna. If you love

him—stay away. You're only hurting him. There's nothing you can do now. Not when you're like this."

Mitch walked with her to the end of the street, sat her down in her car, and then called her sister to come get her. The whole thing made Anna angry. She wasn't sure if she was mad at Mitch or at herself, but a few months after that, she checked into this place that was supposed to make her stop drinking, which her dad helped pay for. After three of those places, she didn't take a drink again. Then she met Greg. They had decided to get married quickly because they weren't all that young anymore, and they wanted a child. Anna didn't know if she could still have kids, but then Missy came. She was beautiful and perfect. She was everything to Anna. Missy was her one chance to do something right. As Anna thought about Missy, she wondered why Jeremy had never been that to her. She hadn't been ready for Jeremy. He was like the haircut you had to get because your sister stuck gum in your hair, not because you wanted it short. That was awful, but it felt true. Anna was so young then, so irresponsible. She was different now, but then—well, she didn't like who she had been then. She might have loved her son eventually, but she hadn't ever gotten the chance. She hadn't taken the chance.

The silence in the car made Anna nervous. She shook her head and looked at the church. She fiddled with the radio, but that only made it worse. She turned on her CD. Nondescript piano music filled the car. It calmed her. Anna thought about what Mitch would think of this music. Her "elevator" music. He always used to tell her that he didn't care what kind of music she listened to as long as it was actually music. He would rail for hours about the "utter crap" she listened to. Mitch didn't like anything about her, Anna thought, except for her boobs, and her legs, and her pretty face. No, that wasn't right. He did love her, but he didn't know why. They would not have been happy if they had married. Anna hoped her son was marrying his beautiful girl for more than her looks. Anna picked up the newspaper clip again. This girl was pretty, but it was her joy that made her pretty. Her hair looked a little greasy, and her face was rather square, and her nose almost disappeared on her face, but her eyes and her smile and the comfortable way she sat made her look pretty. Jeremy made her pretty. Anna thought maybe that was what successful relationships were all about.

The church doors opened, and people spilled out like the rush of gin from a glass knocked over by a rowdy drunk. They lined both sides of the sidewalk by the church and made a whole bunch of noise that Anna could hear from her vantage point across the street. It wasn't cheering really, just a muffled hum of cheerful voices. She took a deep breath as her

son waltzed out of the church with a snow angel at his side. They strode out hand in hand and then fell into the waiting car. Everyone, including Anna, watched the car as it pulled out into the street and accelerated. Anna followed the car with her eyes as it stopped at a red light and waited. It almost felt like it was waiting for her; waiting for her to get her fill of this moment. Then the light changed, and the car drove away.

When Jeremy was born, Anna could not handle it. Mitch had to handle everything. He quit his job teaching guitar and piano lessons and got a job with a desk and a tie. He bought his first suit and wore one to work every day even though it boxed him in. Mitch was a father immediately. Jeremy was his world, and he was going to give his boy a good life. Anna stayed home with Jeremy. Mitch thought it would be best for their child if his mother took care of him. Anna loved her baby; she must have. She just couldn't handle it. From the first day he was always crying. Anna felt she failed as a mother. What kind of mother couldn't make her baby stop crying? Did they all cry this much? She didn't know who to ask for help. Mitch tried, but he worked long hours and was never home, and when he was home, they fought. Oh god, they fought about everything: groceries, Jeremy's new playpen, parents coming over for the weekend.

Mitch would come home from the job he hated and judge everything Anna had done that day. "How much did you spend on milk and bread?"

"We needed more than that, Mitch. Diapers are expensive. And I— I needed a few things."

"What things, Anna? What did you need? Another fashion magazine? Or maybe bottle a of vodka to share with your friends?"

"No."

"What?"

"I'm not going to tell you if you keep accusing me of things."

"Anna."

She would fold her arms across her stomach and stare at him defiantly.

"Oh my god! You are twelve. Grow up, baby— this is life! We have a son now. Remember him, Anna? Remember Jeremy? You can't be a kid anymore. It used to be cute, but now—now— well it's just not fucking acceptable, Anna!"

He always ended screaming. Anna couldn't take it. She would drink in the afternoons just to get through the day. Mitch figured it out and ordered her to quit. He lectured her about how they were adults now and had to take care of a child, and she had to quit. That just gave them one

more thing to fight about. They fought more, and Anna drank more. Then Mitch told her to leave. He said she would hurt Jeremy. She didn't hurt Jeremy, at least not physically, but Mitch wasn't taking chances.

Anna left and didn't come back for five years. Then when she tried to come back, Mitch wouldn't let her see Jeremy. She went without seeing her son for more than ten years. Some days, that bothered her, some days she saw nothing as she swam through a swamp of mixed drinks and loser boyfriends. When Jeremy turned sixteen, he found her himself. Mitch decided he would let Jeremy see her if that's what he wanted. They had gotten along for a while, and then Jeremy came over once to talk, and Anna was passed out on the floor.

She hadn't heard the door open, but she heard it slam. She rolled over onto her back. Oh God. Today. Jeremy was coming today. She couldn't think very clearly, but she knew this was bad.

"Mom!"

"Jeremy, just go home, darling. Please. Just go."

"Mom, are you alright? Mom! Should I call an ambulance?"

Anna struggled to keep the slur from her voice, "No, I just— just go, sweetie."

"Goddamit, Mom! He said this would happen. He said you would be drunk."

"Your father?" Anna rubbed her eyes.

"Yeah, Dad. He said you were worthless, that you could never be my mother."

Anna moaned and sat up. She propped her elbow up on her knee and her head on her hand and turned her eyes to Jeremy. She couldn't hold that for long. Her head slipped, and she just sat looking at the ground. "Hey, pay attention, Anna! I'm leaving now." Jeremy turned and walked out of the apartment, throwing the key Anna had just made for him on the floor. As the door swung shut, Anna heard him spit under his breath, "Yeah, bitch, now I'm leaving you."

Bam! The door swung shut. And just like that, he was gone.

Now he was grown up. All these years, and still Anna didn't really know him. Mitch wouldn't let her talk to her son, and he wouldn't tell her about her son. Her son wouldn't tell her about himself. He was done with her. She looked down at the clipping again: "Jeremy, a recent graduate of Campus College, now works as an architectural engineer." That was all she knew about her son. Where he graduated and where he worked. She knew about as much about him as the IRS did. Bartenders probably knew more about her son than she did. She couldn't know if he liked basketball

or football. She wouldn't have any idea if he had a lot of friends or liked to keep to himself. She didn't know if he liked his coffee black or with sugar and cream, or if he even liked coffee. All the things she didn't know started to pile up in her head, and she shook it to disperse the weight.

The snow was falling harder. 3:45 the clock read. Anna was going to be late picking Missy up if she didn't hurry. She put the key in the ignition and started the car again. She eased out of the parking lot into the empty road and drove away. The snow hit her warmed windshield and melted away on the spot. She came to the intersection. The light was green, and she passed through.

Anna leaned over the bed to kiss her daughter's forehead. "Night, baby. I love you."

"Mommy?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you read me another bedtime story?"

"No, baby. I read you one already. Time for lights out."

"Mommy? Please? Just for me?"

Anna looked into those wide, green eyes and wondered how she ever worked up the courage to say no to this child. "No, those are the rules. One story. Then bed."

"Mommy."

Anna started walking out of the room. The bedtime-stalling routine would not work tonight.

"Uh huh?"

"I love you."

Anna went back over to the bed and hugged her daughter. "I love you too, babe. So much. This much!" She reached her arms way out like wings and wiggled her fingers. Missy giggled.

"Goodnight, hun."

"Goodnight, Mom."

Anna shuffled on slippered feet to the hall closet and pulled the crumpled piece of newspaper out of her pocket. She kicked a pair of white tennis shoes out of the way and moved the hanging coats and scarves until she found the little shoebox in the back. She opened the lid and looked at the two smile lovingly before she placed the clipping among the unopened glass bottles. She closed the lid on the box and slipped it back in the corner. She put a pair of torn up sandals on top of it. Then Anna backed out of the closet and shut the door.

Bridget Cleary Speaks

Carrie Shipers

After Angela Bourke

In March 1895, the badly burned body of Bridget Cleary was found in a shallow grave near Tipperary, Ireland. Eight members of her family, including her husband, were ultimately charged in her death. Historians have been unable to determine whether the various remedies inflicted on Bridget before she died were folk remedies for fever, rituals to cure faery possession, part of a shaming ceremony associated with adultery, or some combination of these.

I'd been sick ten days when Michael mistook me
for a faery, some changeling wife sent to suck
dry the cows and drain the butter's profit. No wife of mine
will lie abed, as though I couldn't lie standing up,
or mending shirts by the fire. We lived apart
our first three years, Michael roaming with hammer and awl
while I stayed alone in town, making dresses and hats
instead of a home. Then five years married, no baby on the way
or the rug, and if faeries could help, I'd have asked
before seven years gone and the longest
I'd ever sat still.

I took the doctor's tincture,
the priest's wafer, even the herbs and new milk Michael thought
I needed, and I paid for it all
with money I'd earned. Bridget Cleary
pays what she owes, never mind her chest
closed up by fever and her husband closing his heart.
Then Michael decided fire would force
his faery wife to bring back the Bridget he knew.
Three times the gathered neighbor-men passed
me over the grate, scorching my gown but breaking
my fever.

A day later I was dressed and drinking tea
and only Michael doubted who I was. He wouldn't let me eat
until I'd sworn I was his wife. Enough, I said, you know
who I am. He threw me to the floor
and the paraffin lamp followed. They buried me naked
with a sack over my head, my face
the only part that didn't burn. Still Michael tried
to save me. Three nights he waited at Kylenagranagh
with a black-handled knife, ready to cut me
free from the white horse the faeries
would make me ride.

If I failed him as a wife, it isn't fair
to blame the faeries. It was the years of living by my needle
and by myself. It was the dried-up hens
clacking their beaks about the child I didn't have.
It was Michael's splintery hands, his sawdust
breath. It was wanting to be just Bridget,
even if I had to be myself in someone else's bed.

Why I'm Glad I Accidentally Forgot My Wedding Rings at the Poetry Reading

Karissa Knox Sorrell

Who would have thought a wild-haired, buck-teethed, nerd-like, long-necked, loose-shouldered Russian poet with a heavy punctuating accent that would in any other situation have annoyed me, with a name that sounds like a girl's, would be the object of new love? It's the reading that did it—not reading really, chanting, singing, whatever it is—he read me into his poems. When he signs my book, he asks me to write my name, and I am disappointed when our fingers don't touch as he hands me the pen. What a beautiful name, he says, but I miss it because I am still thinking about the girl he kissed on the kitchen floor among lemon peels, the woman whose breasts he cupped while dancing on the roof. I look up from my reverie and tell him, Your English is perfect. He gives me that look when his eyes get big and his hair gets taller, and I go on: I know you have an accent, but your use of English is perfect. He smiles, and I walk away wondering if he noticed my left hand, wondering how I got to this moment, contemplating how to get inside a deaf married man's pants. I would speak to him in a foreign language, lie covered by his bedclothes, open and close my robe while he tiptoes toward me. When I drive home on Saturday, I will put on an appropriate cheating song, the one that goes, Your hair is everywhere, screaming infidelities and taking its wear, and I will fantasize during most of the trip. But when I enter my neighborhood, I will turn the song off. When I turn into my driveway, I will put the dreams of Ilya Kaminsky away. But one day, I'll be on my way to work and find a black hair in the seat beside me. One day, I'll open a book and find a curl pressed between two pages. I'll see one hiding inside a shoe, or hanging from a lampshade. I'll lift the clothes out of the dryer and find one, twisted around a button, undone.

Riding the Wagon

Bethaney Wallace

"Grandpa is going to rehab," my dad told us a few summers back. I remember looking at my sister and thinking I could've wedged my whole peach into her jaw-dropped mouth—pit and all.

Mom was huddled into the couch, Kleenex crumbs sprinkling her pants. I stared at my family as though my eyes were a kaleidoscope, and I was viewing a hallucinated sense of reality—like Alice through the looking glass, backwards fronted…jabberwocked. And my eyes began to squint in salty over-wash from sharpness in my tongue.

I laughed. Rehab? That was one word I would never associate with grandparents. Rehab is for celebrities pulling publicity stunts, drugged-out hippies; Amy Winehouse's vacations, but never a place for grandparents.

My brother punched me.

"Stop laughing. Stop being a bitch." He was right. I was being a bitch. But the laughter was beyond my control, relentless. My father dissected me with his stare, without so much as a throat clearing at my thirteen-year-old brother for saying "bitch." That's how I knew he was serious—how I knew this was real.

Two weeks later the "adults" took Grandpa down to Newton's "Health and Rehabilitation Center." That is where he would be staying for two whole months: in a smoke-stained, medical-rejected hospital.

My grandparents, parents, and three sets of aunts and uncles all piled into the orange and black bus Uncle Benny had bought the previous winter for Clay Center Tiger football games. The bus, named "Tiger Rawrrrr," was a 1975 model containing mounted lawn chairs in place of traditional seats. They had packed a cooler full of bottles of water and Shasta sodas, and no beers.

Meanwhile, us "kids" stayed home to watch *Dora* re-runs and eat microwaved Totino's, but mostly to pretend like nothing was wrong. Unless it's Christmas or Halloween or some other upbeat occasion, the children are not involved. We are given ice cream, lotto tickets, or anything else that will keep our lips from forming questions. We were stationed at my house, because as Aunt Betty said, "going to Grandma's would remind the little kids too much of Grandpa." That made me angry. "The little kids" probably thought Grandpa was getting a third knee replacement or off at another senior golf tournament. What they did not think was that their beloved grandpa was a drunk.

Later, during a round of our favorite card game, "Snort," (that I

was almost winning) my five-year-old cousin Kinzlee, and baby of the family, decided it was time to call her mother.

"I want to talk to Mommy; I miss her and Daddy. Where are they Beff-ney?"

"They went out of town."

"Why?"

"Grown-up time." And then she showed her gum-gapped smile—I swear the kid could floss with yarn—and bunny-hopped away to a Spanish counting song.

After everyone had enough time to adjust to Grandpa being gone (approximately 12 days), Grandma decided all of us were going to rehab to visit. Since Kinzlee still needed a car seat, we had to caravan down in real cars. However, instead of riding with our respective families, Aunt Betty decided we would map out a seating chart and plan for "optimal efficiency." So we lined up to hear our assigned seats, with fingers crossed that we wouldn't get an excessive fluid drinker or the van that voted to "jam" to Techno for the two-hour trip.

We sat in the rehab center's meeting room, all ten of us grandkids lined up like the Von Trapp family, listening to dozens of "Hi, I'm Paul, and I'm an addict" speeches. The most interesting case was sixteen-year-old Sarah who got drunk at school by smuggling shots in film capsules. My cousin Sara, "without the 'h,'" sighed all dramatic and uppity, and whispered she was annoyed she shared a name with such an "issue causer." Then it was our family's turn to talk. I opted for silence. But Sara saw her opportunity; taking the floor, she started a teary rendition of how "Grandpa isn't Grandpa." She was right. The liquor turned him into a T.V. junkie, a slurring booze hound—a stranger. But no one wanted to hear her shitty "the Hills" rendition of "reality" that wasn't even qualified for a soap opera nomination. Grandpa embraced her, silencing the sobs. I think it was more of a muffle than a hug. I really missed him.

The meeting continued with other patients' rediscoveries. An intravenous drug user hugged his neon-tressed girlfriend, who cried for 45 minutes non-stop. I couldn't understand why everyone got so emotional. As far as I could tell, being surrounded by 19 hysterical family members wasn't gaining you any pride. This was rehab; you checked in your self-esteem along with the flasks and cigarettes. So I stood there, tearless, while the majority of my family hunched in theatrical despair.

"What's wrong with you?" Sara managed to heave/squeak between breaths.

"I didn't come here to make him feel worse." And I went to find

Sarah and ask her for more drinking tips.

The meeting ended with a ceremonious painting of tea cups.

"These tea cups represent success, and you will get to keep them after finishing the program," the rehab director informed us. The patients created their art projects like a group of kindergartners, diligent workers covered in neon paint and Elmer's glue. Each placed their technicolor cups across the cafeteria counters in a proud display. Spouses were invited to join craft time by decorating an accompanying saucer, which could then be picked up after staying sober for one year.

I kept trying to make the connection between cups and saucers and substance abuse. The only real answers I could come up with were practical ones: that any other dish would be easier to do lines off of. That tea cups were too small, and therefore, alcoholics would have to keep refilling them. That the tea cups were essentially a neutral zone, free from temptation.

The director asked if the spectators had any comments or questions. I considered sharing my revelation with the group, making an inappropriate joke to interrupt the awkward silence, like Chandler of the T.V. show Friends. But after the last laughter run-in with my family, I decided against it. The director waited the obligatory 30 seconds of silence, then finished by passing out packages of flower seeds. Plants. Growing. *This* made sense.

"Take to your garden, and let them grow. Let the flowers remind you of your experience here, and how you have helped and will continue to help your loved one." I did not point out that she'd given us annuals instead of perennials.

Grandma planted all of our flower seeds that spring. They were gorgeous and colorful and different than any other flowers in her garden. But they also attracted the most weeds and sucked more water than any plant I'd ever seen. And then they died, just like the package indicated they would. So we dug them out of the cold ground to make room for new flowers, ones that would require less work. Flowers that would grow back on their own without being replanted each season. But the following spring, Grandpa went to the greenhouse and bought more annuals.

"Grandpa, you know those don't grow back? Remember how much work they were?" I reminded him in fear that I'd be assigned to garden duty. But this time when they bloomed, he picked them fresh on his sober-a-versary (we celebrated his third this summer) and used his purple tea cup, atop Grandma's polka dotted saucer, as a vase.

"I keep them," he said, "as a reminder that anything worth having is worth the extra work."

Last Call

Molly Hamm

The metal hulk towers ominously
over the icy strip. Climbing the stairs,
I clench the railing
as though I am holding the world
for the first and last time.
Lilliputian snowflakes drop
like atomic bombs in the final hours.
Static over the intercom
relays a safety message I neither hear nor believe,
but which sits
like a cancerous lump in my mind.
The barrel of the plane shakes violently
as we lurch forward, up, and away,
towards a destination unknown.

Black Lidded Jars
Chris Graber

PFC Jake Riley

Chris Carpenter

Jake came to camp fresh outta high school.
Nth-generation soldier with a love for jazz.
His dad, and his dad, and his dad, and his dad,
And so on, were soldiers. Jake had to be, too.

Jake could play, though. The sarge called him,
Satchmo reincarnate. Though none of the guys
could ever figure that one out. All they knew was,
you had to tap your foot when Jake played his horn.

The boys piled out of the truck, ready to kill.
Jake thought only of his mute horn back home.
Shoot, Jake, shoot! Aim for the head!
And with tears in his eyes, Jake aimed for his own.

Hell Breaker

Paige Girard

They buried him facedown. Just in case he wasn't completely dead. In case he woke up and decided to claw his way back to the surface. He would just keep digging and digging until he broke through on the other side. What exactly was on the other side, no one was certain. Probably Hell.

Funny how Hell is only a few miles beneath our feet while Heaven is thousands, if not millions, of miles beyond the stars. In theory, we're much closer to Hell than we are to Heaven. Makes sense. It takes a little bit of Hell leaking through to the surface to catalyze the horrendous actions of certain individuals.

Sometimes they'd fantasize about him breaching the fortifications of Hell and falling into the eternal fire to burn for all time. They smirked at the notion of his sallow flesh blackening and crumbling as he writhed in perpetual pain, the flames of the inferno licking hungrily at his every extremity. His envisioned misery brought solace to all those whose hearts he'd torn open, the agony of loss overflowing into every fiber of their beings. He'd stolen from them in a way no one ever had. His very presence had encompassed the town in a dark shroud, laying a profound haze over the land unlike anything ever produced by nature and her storms.

He was gone, nothing more than another unnamed mound at the edge of town. However, it seemed as though his inky eyes and gaunt face would continue to loom in the recesses of people's minds, refusing to become a completely repressed memory. The crunching of leaves or the cracking of bones. The wind in the trees or the rustling of his cloak. The chill of winter or the ice of his breath. It made no difference. The hearts still pounded, and the hair still stood on end with every trace of his impossible presence.

Though spirits had lifted at his passing, death still hung heavily over the little town nestled at the foot of the hill. It seemed as though the light of hope still struggled to break through, refusing to shine its light once again. But life continued. Every now and again, they would cast a wary eye toward his grave, making certain he remained lifeless in his tomb. As the town slowly transitioned to existing with the pain of bereavement, he lay dormant.

The Earth's core rumbled, the plates shifted, and Hell wound its tendrils skyward once again. It twisted and wormed its way upward, penetrating the now centuries old crypt. Hell coiled its way over and around

his corpse, filling his dusty lungs with the breath of the undead. Sinew and flesh began to crawl about his bones, reforming into the monster of a man he had been in life. His lips plumped, his mouth moistened, his hair shone, and his black eyes glistened once again. With his nose pressed against the top of his coffin, he knew he must be facedown. He turned and drove his fist through the floor. With a strength he'd never before known, he tore at the dirt that had sealed him away for so many years.

Once he broke the surface, he felt the heat of the moon on his face, his chest; his whole self. Death had left him so cold. He stood there in the rotting cemetery, observing the crumbling ruins of the graves that marked the births and deaths of individuals long forgotten. His nostrils burned at the stench of the dead rotting beneath his feet. The sounds of the night filled his head. Through the din of birds calling, dogs howling, worms crawling, he could hear the conversations of those in the town nestled at the base of the hill. Hundreds of families gathered in their homes, conversing about the day's trivial events while the televisions murmured in the background about nonsensical happenings worldwide.

The town had changed considerably since he was alive. Some of the houses and buildings remained, but dozens of new structures lined the streets, which had also increased in number. He recognized the general store, now a bar of sorts, where he had disemboweled the proprietor and a number of customers. The house on Vine Street where he had slaughtered the McAdams family. The intersection of 1st Street and Green Street where he had finally been cornered and executed in the most unceremonious fashion. His lips drew tightly across his teeth at the memory of the horror he had brought upon this insignificant little town. And now he had returned. Now he could resume the bloody work commended to him by the very evil of Hell itself.

The moment I pulled into town, it was quite clear I was the only individual who drove a motorcycle. I was also probably the only person in town who owned any leather other than cowboy boots. The main street was quiet. Hardly any cars. Except outside the funeral home. Lots and lots of cars there. I drove on past and pulled into the gas station. After I filled my baby up, I tossed a bill at the cashier and took a seat with the bag of seeds and the Mountain Dew I'd grabbed. C-stores like this typically served as

the central gossip hub, and I planned to do a little eavesdropping on the old folks while I chewed my seeds and sipped my pop. I could feel the eyes of the hairy-lipped women and liver-spotted old men bore into me as I slid into a corner booth. Their cups of coffee were hovering mid-swig as they watched me peel open an outdated Wheels-4-You. Pretty sure I made a good choice in coming here. Something was up. Big time.

I'm usually pretty good about deciphering crime reports and obits, and so far my skills seemed to be legit. Sometimes, it's tough. I mean, it's not like families write shit like: "Our departed loved one was torn to bits by the boogey man…" No way, it's never that easy. They're always fluffy and bull-shitty like: "Our dearest beloved was abruptly taken from us in a tragic accident…" Yeah, that's all well and good, but what I look for is four or five death-ographies where moms and dads and kiddos were offed by some bloody "accident." I know I've really got something when there's about two or three weeks' worth of articles reporting "indescribable, brutal, seemingly-related," crimes. Yes, it takes a sharp eye and an open mind like mine to spot that the days of Ed Gein and Jeffery Dahmer are pretty much over. I mean, yeah, there're still psychopaths out there, but now a days most of them are too lazy to do all that horror-movie shit. They just opt for guns and poison and whatnot. But I'll be the first to tell you that I've slipped up before. I've had some cases where I thought I was working some monster-in-the-closet gig that turned out to be just some village idiot who liked to grab the ankles of the movie theatre patrons. Guess he had a fetish.

I'm pretty sure that's not the case with this town. Old farts tend to be suspicious, but these people seemed on edge. More than your average coffee shop. They were speaking in hushed voices, but my ears are used to straining to catch the good stuff. I kept hearing words like "weird," "un-usual," "unnatural." This was a good sign. But it wasn't long before their wobbling jowls began to talk about the high school football team and which teenagers were knocked up. Apparently, brutal death was old news. I chugged the last of my pop and tossed it in the can as I left. Their eyes were on me again as I mounted my bike. My baby. The one thing in this world I loved that loved me back. I'd worked hard for her. Well, I mean, forgery isn't easy. And it's not like I get paid for the work I do, not like the Ghost-buster dudes. But I make it worth my while. I figure I've saved enough members of society to justify a few fake credit cards here and there. It's not like I'm robbing banks. Regardless, my baby was my reward. There's no job too fucked up that she can't wipe from my mind with just one twist of the throttle.

I swung into a faded stall outside the only motel in town. A little bell dinged as I entered the front office, and a graying old lady teetered out of a back room. The nightly rate was twenty-five bucks. Only in a town like this. I slid her a fifty and took the key she handed me. Room 5. That's a decent number, I guess; no evil connotations came to mind at least. The lock clicked, and I kicked the door open with my foot and threw my stuff on the bed. This room was worlds apart from the caliber of motel rooms I've seen in my day. Instead of mirrors on the ceiling and a coin slot on the headboard, the ancient squeaking of this bed and the Jesus paintings seemed to dissuade all the activities my usual rooms encouraged. It's not that I like those kinds of rooms or anything, but they're cheap. And no one asks questions, which tends to be useful in my line of work. I threw myself onto the bed, which groaned under my weight, and flipped on the TV. I really should've been out investigating, but my ass hurt from riding all the way out there.

The hour hand was on the eight-o-clock mark of the little rooster-shaped alarm clock when I finally opened my eyes again. I seemed even sorer now than I had before, and now my stomach was growling. Switching off the TV, I went back out into the chilly autumn air, the sun nearly set. I'd seen a bar and grill of sorts down the street, so I bypassed my bike altogether and walked. It was pretty reminiscent of the hundreds of bars I've stopped at on previous occasions. Local sports memorabilia, deer heads and antlers on the wall, posters of scantily clad chicks holding beer, a cigarette machine, a jukebox; a big screen. Being the stranger in town was nothing new to me, so I was hardly fazed by the leery sets of eyes following my every move. However, for a Friday night, this bar seemed pretty vacant. Out of the fifteen or so tables, only three or four were occupied, and there were only a handful of dudes at the bar. I climbed onto a barstool next to an older man with a wiry, peppered beard who reeked of sweat, dirt, and whiskey. Must've been a farmer. There were no girls here, old or young. Only guys. It took about ten minutes to get my cheeseburger and fries, and as I ate and drank my pop in silence, I tried to pick up bits and pieces of conversation. Just like earlier at the gas station, conversation was hushed and guarded. I wasn't getting anything useful, so when the bartender came to see if I needed another drink, I asked him what was up.

"You heard about the killings?" he asked.

"Yeah, but just the crap they put in the papers."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, don't believe everything you read." He refilled my glass. "What're they saying, five or six deaths?"

"Yeah, that's about right," I answered, finishing off the last of my

cheeseburger.

He scoffed. "Yeah, I quit reading that garbage. Five or six, my ass! Try fifty or sixty!"

I coughed a little, a bit of French fry getting stuck on the way down.

"Fifty or sixty?" I said, gasping, clearing my throat with a swig of pop. "You've gotta be shitting me!"

"Wish I was, son. In a town this size, that many people dead and disappearing makes a huge dent. It's got people scared. Myself included."

"Damn, that sucks. So what about the cops? They got any leads or anything?"

"Nope. Brought the Feds in a few weeks ago. They walked around, flashing badges, asking questions. Now they're pursuing various 'leads' in the comfort of headquarters." He spat with disgust into the trash-can behind the bar.

"So, they don't know what… who is doing this?"

"No, sir. Saying it's probably some homicidal maniac or something. Well, I ain't ever heard of any man killing so many people in such a short amount of time. If you ask me, I'd say there's some sort of conspiracy going on."

Man was smart. Sort of. At least he was smart enough to realize that whatever was going down was bigger than him; bigger than this whole town.

"So," I asked, "Do the victims have anything in common? Any similarities?"

"Nope. Men, women, children, grandmas, grandpas. Doesn't make any difference. We've found 'em all mangled, drained of blood. Some of 'em, we only find a necklace or a shoe, you know?"

I grimaced.

"Just you watch," he told me. "By nine tonight, this place will be cleared out, the whole town will be. Everyone will be at home, windows and doors barred until the sun comes up tomorrow. I suggest wherever you're staying, you get there and don't come out 'til morning."

All right, a warning like that is more like an invitation in my opinion. Maybe it's just my nature to not do what I'm told, but I think it has more to do with the fact that I'm not going to catch shit if I hole up in my motel room with the blankets pulled over my head. So, I was going to head to my motel, but only to grab my sawed-off, holy water, and other spook-killing equipment, because I still wasn't sure what I was dealing with yet. All I was sure of was that it was definitely not human. No human had ever

killed so many people in such a short time. Gary Ridgeway has the record, and that took him several years to pull off. I shoved the last French fry in my mouth and drained my Mountain Dew. I made a point to tip the bartender highly, secretly hoping he'd be alive long enough to spend it.

Once I got back to my room, I loaded my jacket pockets and slung my shotgun over my back. I slipped my Colt .45 into the holster at my hip, my Bowie into my boot, and instinctively patted my chest, making sure I had a full supply of rock salt shotgun shells, silver bullets, hollow point bullets, and every other kind of bullet that had the potential to kill shit. Check. Again, I decided to walk. This town was small enough, and I didn't want my baby getting hurt if she didn't have to.

The bartender had been right. It was now just a quarter after nine, and the whole main street was deserted. Except for me. I walked past the bar, which, just a few short minutes ago, had been the most happening joint in town. Now the curtains were drawn and all the lights were off, including the neon ones. The streets were eerily quiet, the stillness interrupted only by the scuttling of leaves being pushed along the asphalt. I turned down the street just south of Main. Barely any of the houses had their lights on. No pets were in the yards; no televisions shone through the windows. It was as though the whole town was holding its breath; waiting for the night to pass. It reminded me of a movie I watched once. The one they always play during Easter. The Ten Commandments or something, where the angel of death winds its way through town, and all the slaves are peering out their windows praying to God and everything else that it passes over them. Yeah, it was just like that. But I've never seen any angels, and if I ever do see one, I sure as hell hope it's not the one responsible for death. As I walked, the street lamps grew fewer and farther between. I was on the western edge of town now and could see a hill ahead, dotted with lumpy little mounds. The cemetery. Good place to start. You'd be surprised by the kind of shit that goes down in certain cemeteries.

The gate was rusty and hung partway open, dangling by one hinge. It was very still here as well; even the wind didn't seem to whisper up here. Maybe I was psyching myself out, but something made me swing my gun around. I cocked it slowly and raised it ever so slightly. Good timing. No sooner had I done that than I heard the first crunch of leaves as the unmistakable sound of a footfall hit the ground somewhere behind me. I spun, aiming the gun at whatever fell between the crosshairs. Nothing. I felt a breeze, but it wasn't the wind. I didn't know what the fuck it was. I heard another crunch and spun around. Fuck. Still nothing. Whatever this bastard was, it was fucking with me, and I do not like being fucked with. I

straightened up my gun and pulled it tight to my chest. Clenching my eyes shut, I took a deep breath; I needed to get a grip. Slowly, I opened them.

Have you ever seen death? I don't mean the kind of death lying in a casket at the funeral home, but the kind of death that stares straight into your soul. It makes your whole body seize up and go cold and your lungs struggle to breathe in the putrid taste of decay. It tightens its icy hands about your heart, making it fight to beat and pump blood to your extremities that are going numb. Before you know it, you've sunk to your knees and are staring up hopelessly into its inky black eyes. Your brain can do nothing but think of falling into the infinite darkness, and you can't imagine ever breaking free of the glacial grip it has on you.

Well, this is what I saw when I opened my eyes. I didn't know who he was, but I knew where he'd come from. I knelt there on the spongy ground, staring into the two glinting black holes on his face. My gun hung limp in my hands; I couldn't remember what to do with it. I was mesmerized by every inch of him; he was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. His skin was sallow and thin, like rice paper, and his veins popped out beneath it, the blood running black within them. His nails were glassy, and his fingers long and thin. He wrapped them about my shoulders and lifted me effortlessly, so that my toes dangled just above the ground. I'd put him at about five foot ten, a few inches shorter than me and way thinner. How he was able to lift me over his own head is beyond me. Now he stared up into my eyes, and his lips curled over his teeth in what must have been a smile. Each of his teeth gleamed brilliantly in the moonlight, large and white and perfect. His mouth began to open, wider and wider, until I thought surely he couldn't open it any further, but he did. Somehow, his jaw seemed to unhinge, like those sick-ass snakes on National Geographic. He drew me closer to him, and the death on his breath stung my nostrils. I cringed. His mouth was very near to me, closer than I'd want any dude. Ever. I felt his teeth graze the side of my neck and swore I could hear the pulsing of my jugular echoing back to me out of the cavern of his mouth. He was going to…bite me? Then I remembered my shotgun, dangling uselessly around my neck like an oversized necklace. I grabbed it and slammed it upward into his chin. He staggered slightly and dropped me to the ground. I landed in a heap and clambered back to my feet, aligning his face in my sight. But my finger hesitated on the trigger. He had his hand on his lower jaw, and I could see the black blood running between his fingers, slowly, stickily, like it was half coagulated already. I'd really nailed him. But before I could smirk at the damage, his head jerked up and his eyes locked on me. That freak-o smile was on his ugly ass face again, and I noticed the gash in his

chin vanish, like it was being stitched up with an invisible needle. Fuck me. He raised his fingers to his mouth and began to lick them clean of his own rotten blood, his eyes never leaving mine. My mouth went slack. What the fuck? I blinked slowly. Shit, the bastard was gone. Well, gone as in I couldn't see him anymore, but he was still here. Somewhere.

I didn't even bother turning around, and it didn't matter, because he was behind me before I could make the conscious decision to do so. I felt his bony hand on my back as he shoved me to the ground. The force with which he pushed me was shocking, and I flew forward and smashed into a crumbling headstone. I dragged myself back to my feet. No more bullshit. I aimed my gun at him again, and this time there was no hesitation. He stumbled back a few feet as each round hit him square in the chest. It didn't even wipe the smart-ass smile off his face. He dusted the rock salt off and approached me. He moved slowly, although by this point I was positive he could've been here in half a second. I grabbed blindly at my holster, and fired four shorts of silver straight at his heart. This time seemed to slow him a little more, unless he was just fucking with me again. More sticky blood spurted from his chest, but soon slowed as his skin and bone reformed. I had no idea how to kill this bastard.

He began to approach me once again, his eyes sparking hungrily. I backed up. I hadn't gone far when I stumbled and fell on my ass. I landed on something. Something soft, cold. An arm. This arm was attached to a girl, about sixteen or seventeen. She lay face up, her eyes staring up into the cloudless night sky, glassy and lifeless. Her neck was smeared with blood, a huge gaping hole where her throat had been torn open. Looked as though I'd interrupted dinner. So this is what he'd been doing, sucking the town dry one person at a time. Well, not anymore.

I hoisted myself up and slid my knife out of my boot. He slunk toward me, his sunken features illuminated in the moonlight. It didn't matter what this thing was; I was done trying to figure it out. All I knew was that he was a nasty son-of-a-bitch. Hell may have spat him out, but I was tossing him back in. He charged. We sprawled across the ground; he pinned me down. He was going for my neck again just like a dog, going straight for the jugular. Again, his strength was astounding. His muscles bulged in his thin, blood-drenched arms, the black veins protruded, filled with the stolen blood of the town. Throwing my head side to side, I did everything I could to prevent him from sinking his cold teeth into me. Slowly, I worked the knife between us, struggling to find an opportunity to jab it in. Fuck yes. Luck finally gave. I felt the knife slide into his chest, right where his heart should be. He slackened and let out a shriek so piercing, yet guttural,

it was unlike anything I'd ever heard from man or beast or any combination of the two.

I yanked the knife out and rammed it into his throat, sawing through the skin and bone and tendons until his head fell to the soft earth with a dull thud. I scrambled up and pulled the small canteen of lighter fluid out of my back pocket. His body continued to writhe as I doused it with kerosene and threw a burning match on it. His head lolled around between two headstones. I drenched it and kicked it into the smoldering heap of his body. Together his head and body filled the air with rancid black smoke as they blackened and shriveled into a heap of ash. Coughing, I staggered backward and watched his remains burn. I didn't leave until every inch of him was sufficiently reduced to dust. I've made that mistake before. Once I was sure he was gone, I hoisted the dead girl onto my shoulders and began my descent back into town. I slid her off my shoulders in front of the funeral home. One last casualty.

I fumbled stupidly to get my key into the lock of my room and collapsed onto the whiny bed. When I opened my eyes again, the sun was shining weakly through the paisley curtains. Stiffly, I raised myself into a sitting position, swung my legs over the bed and buried my face in my hands. I really just wanted to go home, but for now, I'd have to settle for a shower. Unsteadily, I made my way to the little bathroom and flipped on the light. In the mirror, I examined the damage the night had inflicted on me. My neck had a decent sized gash in it; hadn't noticed that. That was going to need stitches. I hated giving myself stitches. My blonde hair was much darker than usual, caked with dirt and dried blood. The scratches on my arms were no big deal; they just itched a little. I turned the faucet on as hot as it would go and climbed in fully clothed. The water swirled around my feet in dark circles as I rinsed the grime from my body.

I wrung my clothes out and shoved them in a plastic sack. I threw on a spare set of jeans and pulled a tattered T-shirt over my bruised chest. After slipping my feet back into my boots and adjusting the collar on my jacket, I turned the lights out and loaded my few possessions into the saddlebags. My baby rumbled contentedly, and for a brief second, I forgot that I didn't know where I was going. As the road slid away beneath me, I didn't recall that my life sucked. I didn't remember the fact that the only home I knew was the one I ran away from ten years ago. It didn't occur to me that I had no one to go see. I managed to overlook the fact that everything I did in life was completely in vain. I cleaned up this world in a way no one would ever understand or appreciate, and for what? So I could see what it's like to be an inch from death four to five times a month? So I can

always be the stranger who receives the dirty looks? I was tired. Tired of mopping up all the hell in this world. I'm a sinner, but why should I be the one to fight against it all the time? I'm not the only one drinking from the fountains of Hell that seem to spring up at every turn. And where was Heaven? Maybe it was so far away that it might as well not even exist. Besides, Heaven didn't matter; it was Hell I had to worry about. It was Hell that shook the foundations of humanity, threatening to topple society upon itself. But right now, the only rumbling I was aware of was the roar of my baby as she bore me, and me alone. That's the great thing about motorcycles; there's no room for excess baggage.

how to fuck a stranger
Jimbo Ivy

first off: never, ever, ever
utter the word ‘fuck’.

‘fuck’ stains the lips of amateurs;
clumsy kids caught stretching into skin.
curious kittens pawing, pouncing at new-found sex.
much like the blind mice, they crash;
face first against flawed walls
hewn haphazardly from birds, and bees,
herpes simplex 1 and 2.
jesus, after all;
what would He do?

second: always, always,
know your prey, your field of play.

a silver cross at the neck
does not mean ‘no.’
a short skirt, open shirt,
does not mean ‘yes.’
remember, bars work best-
dives best of all;
the cheap swill and swirling dim proclaim, proudly:
“Here is the place one comes to fuck a complete stranger.”
this should be bronzed, bold, above the door.
ignore waitress-with-new-pushup-from-Frederick’s,
(“I bought it in LA! Look, my girls are practically hugging!”)
piranhas don’t eat piranhas; and she’s after bigger bills than yours, also
remember, bouncers are often boyfriends; you’ve been warned.
give wet-mascara-three-tequilas-down-already in the corner booth
wide berth-
she’s been through enough, in fact,
smart money says she’s bleeding black over someone just, like, you-
must be smooth, as they say.
smart, calm, never over-eager,
always, always in control, always aware.
remember, nine times out of ten, at ten past eleven

if she's sitting alone, she's sitting stood up.
i'm not sure why this happens;
the world is as full of cowards as it is sharks, I suppose.
(which one are you?)

third: almost, always,
good words trump even the world's finest vodka. (Grey Goose, if you're curious)

the greeks coined "en vino veritas".
but truth, is not your goal, or best currency.
and so, your words, your very best words, should curve and roll,
around, up to, nudging against; her truth, not yours.
her truths;
your keys,
her secrets;
your advantage,
but fear not:
slipped, jammed, cut, starved, slapped, and forced
into every media aware,
breathing American woman
is a network of loose stitching.
black threads, wrought most expertly by cruel, curved fingers:

Kira
late-night shocked-breath shadow
man belt dangling below pale, round hunger; trust
undone unseated heart seeded with need for something other
than that memory, that tearing, that little death
that brings complete surrender.

Carrie
arms akimbo
staring down
too skinny numbers
“where’d my little girl go?”
soft angles and skinny knees made
“plump”“chubby”“pudgy”“curvy”“fat”“pig”
tears for fears of empty doorways lonely long
empty air dances spent sitting sweat compressed
body hate body weight body power body shame body
smaller count the numbers fill with empty take the
pill the answer smaller stomach shrinking
muscles wasting eyes grow brighter
numbers tumble voices praising
more to skinny more to sexy
down the throat up
the throat in their
eyes oh so
perfect.

i could go on…
for as long as my heart could stagger.

but; to business.

on these threads;
tug, softly
tug, warmly
tug, gently
speak, some truth
speak, some lies
speak, for her.

If you do, all these things.
If you pay, all these attentions,
She’ll be yours.
quiet, humming between your sheets.

After.

remember why you went.
remember, why you came.
remember whatever it was that made you like this,
need this,
feel this
alone.
remember why you decided,
to fuck a stranger.

fourth:
make her some pancakes, for Christ's sake.
there are absolutely not enough pancakes in this hard, little world.

Sick

Andrew Blackburn

The nurse called my name
And directed me down the hallway to Exam Room Number Three, my usual.
I sat on the table and picked up a copy of "Your Garden, Your World"
(The only alternative was "The Monthly Bird Watcher").
Before I had even finished reading "Soil: Friend or Fiend?"
There was a quick double-knock on the door,
And I watched it swing open slowly, giving way
To a tall, familiar man in a white coat.
The doctor furrowed his brow when he saw me,
Probably out of concern – this was the fifth time I'd seen him this month,
And he had yet to give me a correct diagnosis.

Last week, I'd been sick with strep, and I know for sure it was strep,
I WebMD'd it and everything, and I had almost all the symptoms.
But he said if my throat wasn't sore (a technicality),
We could probably rule out strep.
The week before that, I had the flu; my fever was sky-high.
He said my forehead was likely to be warm
After playing three hours of basketball,
And it probably wasn't the flu.
What a quack.

He ran his hand through what was left of his fading gray hair,
And asked me what the problem was this time.
I told him how the strep from last week had taken a turn for the worse
And morphed into the measles.
See? Look! Red bumps all over my face!
I smiled, arms crossed, triumphant.
He ran his hand across his forehead, muttered the word "acne,"
And sighed.

The authenticity of a fly on the wall

Molly Hamm

A thousand sockets made of crystal globes
change channels to watch the surrounding activity.
A piqued interest fades into a sense of necessity,
as household monuments flash like road maps
across the screened eyelids.
An unseasoned photographer in a new city,
the slick marble of the countertop,
and the grainy fibers of the worn sofa
are transmitted through a perspective
lacking both depth and insight.

Zooming in on a subject of choice,
the fly exercises its notorious trait of persistence
while revealing its fatal oversight –
peripheral vision. An intruder steps into the frame,
spotted hands waving at the pest
as though they are saying a friendly hello
to a rival. Peppered with assaults,
the fly retreats to an indention in the wall
which serves as a foster home, its inhabitants
nervously watching to see who gives in first.

Tired of waiting to satiate an untapped curiosity,
the fly returns waving a white flag.
Insulted at the brazenness of an uninvited inquisitor,
a game of hide-and-seek ensues, the hunted versus the hunter.
The fly finds himself immersed in a tour of the landscape;
diving in, out, and between landmarks.
The exploration is tainted by fear and urgency
until surrendering, face-to-face, with a buzzing apology.
And now, the authenticity of a fly on the wall
is smattered on the back of an unwashed hand.

The truth about love and science – as we know it

Jessica Ulrich

They told us today that he got it wrong –
Newton, that is –
that our unquestioned textbooks offer us laws
rendered false by relativity
and a smug 0.012 margin of error.
Poor man -
to have pierced the side of truth
yet missed the heart
by an entire dimension,
to have suffered the shadow of a triumph not his own,
that of a warped
and patronizing
future
which now speaks only of his close
approximations.

Perhaps, we too have that excuse.
Perhaps, we can claim
that words murmured in childish hope,
before the impossible curves of timespace
pushed up between us,
were then as close to love as we could come
and now as far from it as
a desperate
fraction
of a decimal.

Shoulders
Emily Glass

A touchstone Interview with Billy Collins

Conducted by Michael Mlekoday and Kim Peek

Billy Collins, former Poet Laureate of the United States, has published eight poetry collections. His poems have appeared in several periodicals, including *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *The American Scholar*, and have been included in multiple other collections and anthologies. During his time as Poet Laureate, Collins created the Poetry 180 project in an effort to reintroduce poetry into high school classrooms. As a part of that project, Collins edited two anthologies of contemporary poetry: *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* and *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*. Collins' own poems are ironic, humorous, surprising, and lyrical. His ability to discuss a wide range of topics in an accessible manner has garnered him popularity as well as critical acclaim. Collins' multiple awards and honors indicate the level of his success; he has received the Oscar Blumenthal Prize, the Bess Hokin Prize, and the Poetry Foundation's Mark Twain Prize for Humor in Poetry, among many others, and his collections have broken record sales for poetry. In October 2009, Collins visited the Kansas State University campus and read to an auditorium packed with students, professors, and community members. He spoke to us in the following e-mail interview about the Laureateship, the role of humor in poetry, and why poetry matters:

touchstone (TS): In your documentary, *Billy Collins: On the Road with the Poet Laureate*, you say that a colleague once described you as a teacher who happened to write poetry, now transformed into a poet who also happens to teach. When and how did this change occur?

Billy Collins (BC): Well, very gradually, considering my first genuine, university-press book did not appear until I was in my 40's. The simple reason is that the poetry began to eclipse the teaching when the poems got better. This happy event did not happen overnight. I spent a lot of time just imitating other poets so closely that the results were third-rate versions of the original. Also, if it's true that everyone has about 300 bad poems in them, I had about 700 in me, and the only way to get rid of them was to write them out. It helps to have the sense to throw them away, too.

TS: I've heard you are a jazz fan. Are you inspired or influenced by other forms of art—theater, film, other types of music or writing?

BC: Jazz is not anything like an obsession of mine. I listen to it along with bluegrass, gospel, Hank Williams, Chuck Berry, Neil Young, Blossom Dearie etc, etc. The connections between jazz and poetry are wildly overrated. I think jazz is to poetry as playing bridge is to knitting—that is, there are a lot of people who do both. The crucial difference is that jazz is improvised and writing is not. There is no eraser on a tenor saxophone.

As for other arts, I like landscape and still-life painting.

TS: How has being Poet Laureate changed your work as a poet?

BC: Being Poet Laureate seriously curtailed my poetry-writing because I became so distracted by all the attention (both the good and bad kind) that comes with it. I began to suspect that the laureateship was a government plot whose purpose was to silence one American poet at a time.

TS: In your poem, "Envoy," you imagine waving goodbye to your poems as if they were your offspring ready to move out and start their own lives. Do you ever get empty-nest syndrome when thinking about all the poems you've sent out into the world? And what about the poems that never make it, that insist on living in your garage forever?

BC: No, I never miss my poems. I mean, if I did, I could just pick up a book and read one, though I would have to be senile to begin doing that. Once the poem is published, I lose complete interest in it. Like a child I have disowned—if that doesn't sound too callous. My envoy poem makes a modest contribution to that genre or, better still, convention that began in the Middle Ages when authors would end a book by bidding it goodbye and sending it off into the world. The end of Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde" is a thrilling example.

TS: You've mentioned in other interviews that humor is a serious means of getting a reader to examine the subject of your poetry. At what point in your career did you start injecting humor into your poetry?

BC: That didn't happen until I was brought to the realization by other poets (Philip Larkin and Kenneth Koch, to name two) that humor in poetry did

not mean silliness. As a young poet—though I wouldn't have dared call myself that—I believed that poetry had to be an obscure expression of misery. I was fairly happy and clear as a person, but I pretended to be dark and complex until I found more salubrious influences.

TS: When I read your poems on my own, there are often things that I find sad about them. Are you ever surprised, when giving a reading, by listeners who laugh at places or things you didn't mean to be funny?

BC: I'm rarely surprised because a lot of the time I am trying to be funny and sad simultaneously. My very favorite emotion is hysteria.

TS: You sometimes talk about how your poems "grope" towards their endings. Is poetry blind or just hormonal?

BC: Hey, I meant groping in the dark, not groping your neighbor's wife at a party. And you knew that!

TS: You've said that you believe one of the troubles of poetry is the poet's presumptuousness, that "the poet takes for granted an interest on the reader's part in the poet's autobiographical life." Yet most of your poems are personal narratives and meditations—small autobiographies, perhaps—of this persona or character you've created. What's the difference, in terms of aesthetics and poetics, between expecting a reader to care about your factual life/memories and expecting a reader to care about your persona's invented life/memories?

BC: You will not find much of a biographical self in my poems because I don't write about my family, my upbringing, memories of childhood and the like. The "I" in my poems is an Immediate Self with no past, just an eyeball observing what it is looking at in the present moment and falling into reveries and speculations. A reader can identify more easily with an eyeball than with a camping trip I went on with my uncle Don. My idea of hell—and I assume most other people's—is having to look through someone else's family album.

TS: You've been known to say that to major in English is essentially to major in death. Can you elaborate on this idea?

BC: I can only point out that in a vast number of lyric poems there is lurking (or parading) an awareness of human mortality.

TS: Why does poetry matter?

BC: I don't know, but I'll take a guess: to remind us of our mortality?

All the World's a Stage

John Quinn

All the world's a plate
of Jell-O, and all the men and women
mere marshmallows in it.

All the world's a box of gerbils,
and all the men and women
are little magnets strewn among the
wood chips, and the gerbils pick them up
and are like, "What the hell? These things
are attracted to each other."

All the world's a silent nebula
and the people bits of iron and silica that will
one day accrue, and

all the world's a dictionary; the people words.
One day they'll be a poem,
but so far it's got to be a bunch of silly metaphors
with Jell-O and gerbils.

Ruth Walks Her Strawberry Step

Megan Travelstead

The first time I met her, Ruth was a batch of papers secured in a manila file folder, handed across the small table to me by the director. The coffeehouse was warm with merry exchanges and the smell of something rich and thick coating my tongue and filling my throat much like the drink in my hands. I stared vacantly with almost slumberous eyes down at the busy folder, feeling distaste for a moment, and then flipped it open. My name was on the page of actors and roles, right next to Ruth's name. She was the role I would portray in the director's production about multiple sclerosis. I stared at the contents, much like studying a person, and Ruth stared back at me in her words. I was pleased to make her acquaintance, and she was glad to make mine.

The director smiled at me in the friendly-distant way one imagines strangers regarding each other. It was the introduction of a foreign space, eerie in the mass of air passed between unknown people. The trick was to not breathe it in too deep and let too much time pass. Silence could speak volumes if you didn't know the language. Usually, this was acceptable to me, but Ruth didn't smile like that. Her smile was recognition of an old friend and the excitement of remembering the past, both the silly and the sad. She gave me my own air to breathe, and as I regarded the director with my own hesitant smile, I wouldn't let anything show through. I spoke with my interview voice. "How old is she?" I asked.

"She is about fifty-five now," the director said. "Yeah, she has led a very fulfilling life despite the illness. What I'm trying to do is spread awareness of this disease through these real testimonies."

Ruth, I said to myself, *you and I are already very different. I'm about thirty years younger than you. Why do you think I should speak for you?*

There isn't much to think on, she said in my mind. *Obviously there's something we have in common.*

The director told me I was chosen for the role because of how the auditions went. None of the younger female roles seemed to fit me. True, I was no theatre major, but when I spoke for Ruth, something changed in me. My voice became more confident, and there was an open honesty in the tone I articulated. When Ruth spoke proudly or joyously, my voice brought the feelings through. I read other roles more than once, giving my all, and then I was myself again. But as I left the room, Ruth's words stretched out in a desperate grip and connected to my retreating form. She spoke again in the

notes the director and stage manager took—I was the best candidate to tell her story. Ruth and I became kindred, youth and age intermingling, and we made an impression that couldn't be ignored.

I looked over the papers again as the director sipped coffee on the other side of the small table. I was going to talk about doctors, diagnoses, migraines, and an underlying belief that God would provide. The exorbitant amount of faith in Ruth shocked me. She wasn't even taking medication for the pain, but using other natural methods to keep her going, like yoga.

Ruth, I said to myself, *you remind me of those religious women on the infomercials advertising the miracle of prayer. How can I possibly speak for you? If I get sick, I go into lockdown—medication, rest, and complete isolation. The world could keep moving, and I would find a way to jump back in. But you, Ruth, you aren't hiding. You and I are so different.*

Yes, she replied in my mind, *but we both love life. It's not enough to just "be here."*

"I know this is going to be a challenge," the director said. "Please don't think you'll be going at this blindly. You're going to be listening to real interviews and hearing her voice, and we will work together on characterization as you come to learn your lines. I really think it's going to work out."

I wished the director a good night, exited the coffeehouse, and climbed wearily into my car. December was falling onto the windshield as I stared at Ruth, the manila folder. The chill, honest air made my thoughts scatter. I didn't have a voice for her, and I wasn't sure how I was going to find one; I was still wrestling around the reason for auditioning at all. But I already knew the answer, my playwriting teacher's voice echoing with my own.

"You are so enthusiastic in class, and I thought that this would be perfect for you. They should be e-mailing you soon with an invitation to audition." She smiled, and it made her tall enough to face me. I wanted to reciprocate her faith in me; I wanted to see that faith expand and carry me off to a place uncharted. The opportunity to walk on foreign land filled my lungs and tugged my lips to form a challenging smile.

Okay, Ruth, I said to myself as I pulled out of the parking space and moved into traffic. *Okay, let's go.*

Yes, that's right, she said in my mind. *We have a lot of work to do*.

The second time I met Ruth, she was a voice recording on a tape player from several hours of interviews the director had conducted. Ruth's voice was sharp over grainy static, taking her time and speaking so modestly, every once in a while laughing somewhat nervously. Her sister had

died years before from the same disease, only she had given up and let it debilitate her. Ruth spoke strongly of her past, pausing over thoughts and then jumping back into conversation, fast-paced speech matching my pen writing notes. I was humbled. I was terrified.

Ruth, I said to myself, *you're so happy with your life. How can you be so confident?*

Mostly, it's because of God, she said in my mind. *God will provide. I know that God takes care of me. You can hear it in my voice. I don't let anything drag me down.*

I wasn't a theatre major, and the rest of the cast knew it. I was quiet, reading over lines like Morse code but always missing a beat and prompting raised eyebrows. The language of theatre was not the foreign land I had envisioned. Inside the rehearsal studio, it was a jungle–light only appearing at times of clarity, and then dark foliage and humidity choked the air I needed. The mirrors covering the walls reflected my worries, amplifying each hesitation, mocking, mocking and multiplying. With each meeting, I grew smaller in my chair. I began to fade, becoming the chair so no one would notice how inexperienced I was. Ruth's name became a criticism as the director called it more often than any other. I needed to work on voice, my beats, my movements. My jerky pace made those eyebrows dance. I watched the clock with the matched anticipation of a child waiting for recess or finger-painting. I began to resent Ruth and the trouble she was causing me. Words on the page were demons sabotaging me, jumping and smirking and making me slip.

Outside of that jungle, I was only a facet of myself. I went through the motions of college life, but the steps I was walking were hollow. I fell away from what mattered most to my life. It was another type of wilderness and a series of wrong turns as I struggled to keep up on the paths I had chosen. I was always one step behind where I needed to be, my bag tugging at my side with all the work I had to do, but just didn't have time for. Often I would think back to when it had all been easier, back to times where your best was always good enough; now, my head was low and unable to see the warning signs in front of me, and my body was slowly giving in to an avalanche. My eyes were adding on age and carving lines into my face that made me look older, much, much older.

I could remember being six years old and directing the neighborhood kids while playing *The Little Mermaid* in my backyard. Everything had to be perfect, even the voices of the characters, and I was constantly correcting everyone until their bodies would sink into the marine-themed inflatable pool. I remembered that it was fun only to me, and work for them

when all they wanted to do was play. It was supposed to be fun, playing another person and emulating everything about them. Faced with the realization that I was under constant scrutiny brought me to banging my head against a proverbial wall, and those demon words continued to taunt me.

Ruth, I said to myself, *why should I speak for you?*

But she was silent, frowning, mirroring the concern in the director's eyes.

"Do we need to schedule extra time for you?" the director asked. It was my first night off the book, and I disintegrated like ashes onto the floor, burning with the shame on my face. I couldn't remember half of what I tried to memorize. "You do realize dress rehearsals are only a few weeks away. Maybe we could cut a monologue to make it easier."

Ruth was protesting, banging at the mirrored walls in the rehearsal studio. She was a copy, another copy, more copies of inaudible words flashing in my head. She still had faith in me, and I could feel tears harvesting behind my eyes. She held them back in a fierce embrace for me and pushed me to rise.

I don't have much left, Ruth, I said to myself.

Don't worry, she said in my mind. *You're not alone.*

"No," I said quietly. "I don't want it to be some special treatment."

"Excuse me?"

"I know I'm working hard, but I don't want some special treatment because this is my first time in a play. I don't want excuses made for me. It's just been difficult with the monologues." I was speaking with a strange force pushing the words through my voice. Ruth stood behind me because she wanted to protect me. She wanted to protect me because I was her only voice, and as I continued to speak, I think the director heard deeper, richer words from my lips. "But I would appreciate some one-on-one time." I think the director heard Ruth and scheduled time for me. We rose to the surface from murky, doubtful waters, and for the first time I caught a glimpse of that foreign land I needed to walk on.

The third time I met Ruth, she was a picture in a newspaper. The director handed me a clipping of Ruth participating in a fundraising bicycle race. She was with her husband in matching T-shirts, grinning youthfully and propelling that bicycle on the track with courageous, trembling legs. I still didn't understand how she could keep going. Those legs had once given out on her because of the disease, and for a while she was confined to a hospital bed. But there they were, moving and taking her somewhere because she had refused to give in and make the disease bigger than herself. She had a foreign land to travel to, just like me, and I moved my fingers

over the picture affectionately. *Ruth*, I said to myself, *I can see you. You really are happy.*

I'm happy because I'm living my life, she said in my mind. *Nothing, not even this disease, has me.*

It wasn't enough to sound like Ruth or look like her. More than anything, I had to move like her, like someone her age. The director was insistent that I practice walking.

"You've got to remember that you walk faster than someone who's fifty-five," the director said. "Imagine how it feels. Try to picture the pain in her legs. She deals with it every day."

Every rehearsal, I had gotten into the habit of listening to music in a corner while the rest of the cast warmed up. It soothed my nerves and put me in a calm place, separating me from the earlier stresses of the day. Sometimes, I rose and danced happily, much to everyone's amusement, or I would stretch as a Zen chant turned my body into one being. I was one fluid motion, ready to curve and contort myself at the director's command. One night, I flipped to the song, "Strawberry Swing," by Coldplay.

Ruth woke up. It started with simple clapping, echoing on a bare wall, and then she jumped to life. My feet began tapping the rhythm to something old-fashioned and pure. The song suspended some understanding that I had been missing, and Ruth wanted to walk.

My feet traveled from one part of the room to the adjoining corner, skin grazing a padded path and almost floating. I slowed down. My posture arched into the confident stride of something beyond me, and the air was almost ethereal. I was walking somewhere else, but I know it wasn't me—Ruth was walking within me. She was the one smiling with a secret on her lips, eyes blazing fire. Her arms rose to keep balance. Her legs shook with the usual pain. Her heart made ready to face the world. Ruth and I walked a strange step while the music in my ears professed one glorious day of blue skies with the one you love. To have one perfect day was all we needed. It was a simple, soulful song, ticking time of symmetry as we walked, happy and connected. I was back in that inflatable pool and far beyond everything it took to be an adult. We clapped our hands. We threw our head back in a rapture that only we could feel. We had our voice and our words swinging with our own strawberry step.

As the last few seconds of music faded, I realized that my eyes were closed. I slowly opened them and squinted, trying to adjust to the fluorescent light. The director was looking over at me and smiling; the rest of the cast watching with confused expressions. They had been stretching and chatting on the wooden benches until the director had entered the room

and saw me walking.

"Are we warmed up?" the director asked.

"Yeah," I said. "We are warmed up."

It happened every night of rehearsal. I entered the studio at least ten minutes before everyone else and walked with Ruth. It was always the same "Strawberry Swing." I didn't try to analyze what the song may have meant because that wasn't the point. There was something underneath the notes that linked Ruth and me. It cut through the jungle and brought in light. My feet tapped the beginning rhythm, and then we dove right in. The room disappeared, and I no longer had control of my body. I gave it all to Ruth. She was the one walking because it was possible. I couldn't understand her pain or the illness because it wasn't happening to me. All I could do was share her happiness and faith for those few minutes in a song. After that, I would go through rehearsal with my head held high as Ruth spoke through me. I forgot about everything I had struggled with earlier because it was meaningless. It wasn't about going from one line to the next, but the final message—Ruth was still alive to talk about her experiences.

It wasn't time yet, she would tell me. *Not yet, not yet.*

The performances went about in slow-motion just like the steps Ruth and I walked. I gave myself up and moved with her on the stage, dressed like a fifty-year old woman. My hair was pulled back into a tight bun, dyed brown and devoid of my youthful, erratic red. I wore loose black pants, straight-legged, and a dark blue turtleneck sweater, black flats on my feet with that extra sole padding. The stage lights caught my face with hardly any makeup, everything amplified—dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep, lines on my forehead I had from years of being too serious and too worried about things I couldn't change, and blue-green eyes that carried more time and experience that I couldn't hide. I was Ruth until the last round of applause carried me off to my final bow. We walked those strange steps that shook people to tears, and our voice inspired open eyes.

On the last day, I packed up the world I had created with Ruth: the binder littered with notes, bulging from the rings to escape; the clothes; the shoes; and the feel of being thirty years older. I packed it all into my bag and fitted it over my shoulder. I just wanted to slip back quietly into my life, but my playwriting teacher stopped me near the door. She wrapped me up in a huge hug and made everything visible to me.

"You were amazing!" she cried. "I can't get over how well you did! When are you going to audition again?"

"I'm not sure." I let out a long blast of air from my lungs. "I had no idea how hard this would be. I mean, it really took a toll after a while."

"Oh, but that's to be expected. Monologues are one of the most difficult parts of theatre. Once you've got those down, you're set for all the rest."

A few more people stepped up to congratulate me, wishing well despite that suffocating air that too many bodies collected. I blushed and laughed, thanking them. My director caught me in a hug as I approached the door, thanking me for all my help. The performances had gone beyond what was expected and hoped for. I smiled in the way that acquaintances regard each other and put the door behind me.

Outside, it was a perfect day. The sun was warm for early March, and the crisp air kept me alert with each gust grasping at my lungs. As I walked, my life slipped back into place, and I thought about what had passed while I was away. I had not been gone for too long, but it didn't matter. My life was my own, and yet I had aged despite all efforts not to. I was more like Ruth than I realized, and it was a bittersweet feeling. I didn't have the same worries of others my age; more than that, I could still feel the pain in my legs that Ruth shared with me so many times before.

There was no point trying to shake it off. I sighed happily, tiredly, and wistfully. Slipping my earphones on, I adjusted tracks to "Strawberry Swing." My feet struck the pavement as I heard the clapping. I raised my arms and slipped into the balance. The foreign land stretched in front of me, different because I was me again.

Ruth, I said to myself, *you and I are so different. But at least I can speak for you.*

Yes, she said in our mind. *We're both talking now.*

I walked that familiar step to my car, and I could feel our faces blending, our hearts beating the symmetry of the song. We grinned mischievously. We stared the world down. I drove home.

touchstone Creative Writing Awards

The **touchstone** Creative Writing Awards are given each year to the best work by Kansas State University undergraduates in each of the three genres. Only poetry, fiction, and nonfiction entries from undergraduates at Kansas State University are eligible. Submission to **touchstone** automatically enters one's work in the contest. In addition to the contributors' payment of two copies, a $75 prize is given to each of the first place award winners, and a $25 prize is given to each of the second place award winners.

Award Winners

Poetry

First Place:
how to fuck a stranger
James Ivy

Second Place:
Things Remembered and Not
Heather Etelamaki

Nonfiction

First Place:
Riding the Wagon
Bethaney Wallace

Fiction

First Place:
A Wedding Announcement
Kate Harland

Second Place:
Ruth Walks Her Strawberry Step
Megan Travelstead

Contributors

Scott Bade is pursuing a doctoral degree at Western Michigan University. His poems have appeared in *Fugue, Pedestal, Night Train, H_NGM_N*, and others. He lives in Kalamazoo, MI with his wife Lori and sons, August and Stuart. And Man Created God in His Own Image and The Vermonter are Ivan Albright paintings.

Andrew Blackburn is a senior at Kansas State University majoring in English-creative writing and minoring in mass communications. He will graduate in May and is getting married two weeks after graduation. He hopes to write professionally at some point after graduating, ideally at a place like Hallmark.

Genna Calkins is a freshman at K-State and a dual English and photography major. Her work has also been published in *Undercurrents*.

Chris Carpenter is a senior from Goddard, Kansas majoring in English-creative writing at Kansas State University. This is his first creative publication. He interned at the *Times-Sentinel* Newspaper in high school and was published there multiple times. Last year, he served as one of **touchstone**'s assistant poetry editors.

Laura Close was born in Fairfax, Virginia. She received a Bachelor's degree from Johns Hopkins University and a Master of Arts from George Mason University. She is currently at work on her thesis in poetry in the MFA program at George Mason. Having held teaching positions at Northern Virginia Community College and several local schools, she is lecturing at a nearby institute that specializes in information technology.

Amy Dyer grew up in Manhattan, Kansas. Her passions are writing, soccer, running, and exercise in general. This is her first publication, so it is a special feeling for her. Amy is a senior this year in creative writing and expects to graduate in May 2010. She hopes to continue her education at an MFA program next year. She married in June of 2009 and looks forward to building a life with her husband, which includes pursuing her dream of becoming a writer.

Heather Etelamaki is a senior from Marysville, Kansas, double majoring in literature and creative writing and drawing.

Paige Girard is a junior at K-State majoring in pre-vet and life science. She took her first writing course since high school this fall (Intro to Fiction Writing with Heather Varnadore) and absolutely loved it. Writing is something she's always loved, but has never had many opportunities to do. **touchstone** is the first and only place she's submitted any of her work, therefore this is her first publication.

Emily Glass is a graduate student in Art at Kansas State University. She current concentrates her time working with oil paint, charcoal, pencil and ink.

Paula Glover has worked for 30 years as a journalist and photographer, and is now a graduate student in English. She also freelances to local publications. A Colorado native, she recently relocated with her son to the Manhattan area from Trenton, New Jersey.

Chris Graber is a ceramic artist born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. He has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Seton Hill University and is currently pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts at Kansas State University. Graber's artwork is based on ethical human interaction and stresses the importance of a stable upbringing for children. His work is on display at Meadowlark Hills and he is a member of the Kansas Artist Craftsman Association, Graduate Students of the Visual Arts at Kansas State, and treasurer of the Kansas State University Potter's Guild.

Molly Hamm is in her fifth year at Kansas State University with majors in English and secondary education, a secondary major in international studies, and a minor in nonprofit leadership. She is currently student teaching 8th, 9th, and 10th grade English at Sumner Academy of Arts and Sciences in the Kansas City, Kansas school district. This is Molly's second year of publication in **touchstone**. Her writing has also been published in the *K-State Collegian, The K-Stater* alumni magazine, and the *Kansas City Star*.

Megan Haney is from Lincoln, Nebraska and is a junior at Kansas State University. She is an animal science (pre-vet) major. She has been published in *Elder* and Leemaur Publishers' *Authors of Tomorrow*.

Kate Harland is a junior in secondary education with English as her teaching field. She was published in **touchstone** last year.

Taylor Harris is a student in the MA Writing Program at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C. Her articles and commentaries have been published by *Hypocrite Press, National Public Radio, Northern Virginia Magazine*, and *The Washington Post*. She also writes for Examiner.com as the DC Race Relations Examiner.

Jimbo Ivy was raised on a small farm in northeastern Kansas, but now resides in the comparative metropolis of Manhattan, Kansas where he is a ninth year senior in English - creative writing. So far he has only been published in the *Mid-American Review* and **touchstone**, but is diligently at work on his first collection, playfully titled *Pornographic Stories for Pornographic People*. Jimbo graduates in May and plans to attend Oregon State University for graduate work. Aside from writing, he is also active in the fledgling slam poetry scene that has begun to take shape here at K-State, including hosting "Auntie Mae's Mighty Fine Poetry Night," a biweekly open-mic performance event at Auntie Mae's Parlor.

Jessica Lakritz is currently an M.F.A. candidate at Eastern Washington University as well as a poetry editor for EWU's literary publication, *Willow Springs*. After graduating in June 2010, she will be heading to Buenos Aires to teach English and continue working on publishing her first collection of poems. Her work is forthcoming in *Cream City Review*.

Jamison Lee was bred from the robust loins of northeastern Ohio's Amish community and was raised by subsidiaries of Nintendo Co., Ltd. He now lives in Bloomington, where he is a first-year doctoral student at Illinois State University. He has most recently been published in *Silenced Press*.

Adam Million is in hot pursuit of an MFA at the University of Wyoming, anticipating graduation in spring 2011. You can find his work in *The Country Dog Review* and forthcoming in *The South Carolina Review*. Look for him at a farmers' market near you this summer as he embarks on a twenty-town tour to uncover where the best turnips grow.

Kara Oakleaf is a third year student in George Mason's MFA program. Her work has also appeared in *Nimrod International Journal*. She lives in Alexandria, Virginia and is currently working on a novel.

Mike Pemberton has a BS in English from Illinois State University. He will complete his Master's degree at ISU in December 2010. He has been published in *Aethlon* and invited to read from his work at the last two Sport Literature Association Conferences held in Tennessee and London, Ontario. In September 2009, he read at the Writing by Degrees Conference at Binghamton University in New York State. "Camaronero" is an excerpt from a novel in progress.

Amanda Prosser is a graduate student in the College of Architecture, Planning and Design at Kansas State University. Outside of studio, Amanda enjoys printmaking and photography where she is able to exercise her Masters concentration of Theory and Poetics in Architecture. She is able to use her artistic endeavors to convey her architectural thoughts.

John Quinn is a senior in English literature and creative writing at K-State.

Tara Mae Schultz is a first-year poetry candidate at the University of Memphis. This is her first major publication.

Carrie Shipers's poems have appeared in *Connecticut Review, Crab Orchard Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, North American Review*, and other journals. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Ghost-Writing* (Pudding House, 2007), and *Rescue Conditions* (Slipstream, 2008), and her first full-length collection, *Ordinary Mourning*, is forthcoming from ABZ Press. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Karissa Knox Sorrell is a second-year poetry student in the MFA program at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky. She lives just outside of Nashville, Tennessee, where she teaches English as a second language at a high school and adjuncts at Volunteer State Community College. Karissa has previously been published in *Relief*. Her hobbies include inspiring young people to love books, cooking with her two children, and playing Wii games with her husband.

Mary Stone graduated from Missouri Western State University in May 2009 with a BA in Literature. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in *New Wine, Canvas, Spring Formal, Flint Hills Review*, and *North Central Review*. She is currently a first-year MFA student at the University of Kansas with an emphasis in poetry.

Minnie Vasquez is a second-year graduate student at the University of Texas-Pan American in South Texas where she is working towards receiving an MFA in creative writing. She expects to graduate in the spring term of 2011 with a focus in playwriting. Although she has submitted fiction pieces, including poetry, short stories and plays to literary journals and contests, she has not yet had any work published or produced. A short play, however, was staged at a literacy festival sponsored by UTPA. Besides attending graduate school, she is a full-time mom, wife, and high school teacher at Med High (South Texas High School for Health Professions) where she teaches courses in social studies and creative writing.

Bethaney Wallace is a senior in English literature and creative writing. She is news editor and writer for the *Kansas State Collegian*. Her work has also been featured in Cloud County Community College's feature magazine, *The Bolt*. She also co-wrote a song for the band Wild Voodoo.

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Enjoy.

touchstone

featuring

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Jessica Ulrich
Heather Etelamaki
Andrew Blackburn
Bethaney Wallace
Amy Dyer
Heather Etelamaki
Chris Carpenter
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Kara Oakleaf
Michael Pemberton
Interview with Billy Collins

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